物語シリーズオフシーズン

そだち
フィアスコ

CHAPTER ONE
SODACHI FIASCO

I loathe Koyomi Araragi. How much do I hate him? Goodness, I hate him so much it overwhelms me. Simply thinking about him is heartrending agony. I stop being able to think about anything else. Even if all the hatred in the world were gathered together like a bouquet, it would be no match for the singular hatred I have for Araragi. My hatred rivals the sun.

If I were to lose this revulsion, I could no longer be myself. My rampant contempt for Araragi is my identity as a person, the axis of my being; the dead center of my very self. If I did not hate him, it would be impossible for me to be me. I have withstood all the terrible things I've seen, and all the tragedies and disasters I've faced, by comparing those adversities to that man.

I am very afraid that this hate, this dizziness and heartburn and nausea and shivers and goosebumps, will disappear from inside of me. Just imagining myself forgiving him, even a little, makes me feel like dying. That is how fragile my presence is inside of me, and how impudent his is.

I wonder if what he did to me is equal to how much I hate him —no, I feel such disgust for that man that there is no room for any sensible doubt. Simply remembering Araragi's smile, his kindness, his concern, his friendliness, and all of his actions, I feel like weeping. Neither riches nor torture, no matter how bountiful or ghastly, can make me reconcile with Araragi. This alone I cannot allow; this alone I cannot yield.

Hate with hate yet hate for hate to hate in hate at hate by hate of hate.

I hate him I hate him I hate him

him I hate him I hate him I hate

Over a month had passed since I left Naoetsu High School. It's all nostalgic for me now, even the affair in that classroom that was so tightly and inseparably coiled around my heart, like a curse… I still haven't put it all behind me to the point where I could say something like that. But, now that I've gone away, it seems like it all could have been a dream.

I don't mean that as a lyrical cliché, like, "But that dream was really a nightmare"; when I say *dream*, I mean that literally.

Incoherent, nonsensical, scattered from place to place, an ambiguous and vague center, boundlessly vast, and yet all that faintly remained with me was something like the dregs of an impression—that kind of illusive dream.

Even if a long time were to pass and I could no longer remember the layout of that classroom, I doubt I could ever put that class behind me.

I wonder if *that man* is haunted by it as well.

Thinking about that is a little thrilling.

And so, today, I begin a new high school life in a new town.

I had no choice in the matter, though.

I was an exile banished from my hometown, and, slipping into feelings of desperation, I thought about just quitting high school once and for all… but that was easier said than done. No matter what it might be, "quitting" something is a very hard thing to do—quitting high school was just as difficult as committing suicide.

At least get through high school.

And I never imagined there would be someone to say that hackneyed line to *me*. I'd thought it was an artificial expression, as suspicious and shameless as saying that life is very precious and all people are equal; nevertheless, when it was said to me, I was affected. "Well, I guess that's right."

Moreover, the one who said it was my guardian, so as a dependent I was in no position to do anything but hang my head and go along.

Of course, when I say *guardian*, I don't mean a parent.

I have no parents. No father, no mother.

They're gone.

They went away.

So the *guardian* I'm talking about here refers to the benevolent couple who, despite having no relation and being complete strangers, decided to look after an orphan with no relatives.

The Hakobe couple.

Probation officers—well, not quite, but for an easy

comparison, I suppose they're like foster parents.

Having left Naoetsu High School after many twists and turns, I became restless and flighty, and I found myself deciding that the home of an elderly couple would be my next destination.

The room I was given was even bigger than the public apartment where I'd lived before.

The Town Hall person ought to have been able to arrange for me to keep living by myself even after leaving town, but for reasons I simply can't fathom, that's how it turned out—though I guess it's typical of me to get swept away in a flow of events I don't really understand. Maybe they had to put a stop to a parentless minor living alone; or maybe, by a stroke of luck, this unfortunate girl just happened to catch the eyes of a wealth family.

A stroke of luck? Me? That's funny.

…Of course, after returning to my senses from my confused state, I might have stubbornly refused at the last minute, and I probably could have maintained the solitary lifestyle of an outcast… but, following much hesitation, I decided to come into the care of the Hakobe family.

My reasons were a mystery, even for me.

Honestly, it would be hard to say that I had no feelings of nostalgia—although the time when I'd taken "refuge" in the home of complete strangers is nothing but a miserable memory for me, it's one of my only memories of a "home".

A meager memory.

I wanted to live in a home.

If that was the reason, it's a paltry one—or rather, a pitiful one—or even, a perverse one… You could call that slipping into desperation too.

At this point, a wretched girl like me has no hope of building real relationships with people—if it were one month ago, I might have believed that, and stubbornly insisted on it; but, whether it's paltry or pitiful or perverse, if I kept insisting that now, I'd feel a sense of defeat.

Like I'd lost to that man.

If he's changed, then I'll change too.

If he's happy, then I'll become happier.

That was my deepest desire, and I could give up on everything else for its sake.

So, I decided to attend high school from the Hakobe home.

Although I was told that it wouldn't be a problem for me to attend a private school since I was receiving financial assistance from the government, I of course declined, and decided to transfer to a public high school.

That said, even I have some points of pride, and even though that pride had been my downfall, it wasn't something I could easily abandon; so, I chose to transfer to the school with the highest test scores in the area.

I easily passed the entrance examination.

The marvelous fruits of having nothing to do but study during my period of truancy.

Well, since I'm transferring in November in second term, I won't be at this school for more than four months. And actually, since third years don't really have a third term, it might be as short as one month.

So it won't feel at all like an alma mater, and I'm not thinking of spreading roots here—I can't say I was happy when I attended Naoetsu High school either, but in the end it's that school, and that classroom, where my roots are more intertwined.

I don't suppose there could ever be a crueler classroom than that one, and that's enough to get me through my first day as a transfer student.

But I've got to be on my guard.

After all, it's in my nature to think up plans to the point of absurdity, and fail spectacularly in ways I couldn't foresee.

This short month of school life is just a bonus of a bonus, but if I want to spend it peacefully and uneventfully, I need to be prepared.

Oji-sama, Oba-sama, see you later—saluting the Hakobe couple, I departed. My break is over—I don't even know when it started, but my break is over—and I'm setting out toward a new life.

Just you wait, Araragi.

Sodachi Oikura is going to grow up.[1]

The first person to make meringues was incredible, don't you think? Cracking an egg and separating the yoke from the whites is an earth-shattering idea in itself, but to think they'd beat only the whites instead of the yoke, which you can tell at a glance is more abundant in nutrients… There's no way they could have predicted that if they beat just the egg whites, if they kept patiently beating and whipping the egg whites, then it would turn into something like whipped cream, is there? And then they took that tasteless, flavorless thin foam and baked it into a dessert; it's simply astonishing—this is no good.

Rejected, rejected; totally rejected.

Would anyone introduce themselves like that?

If a transfer student greeted people like that on her first day, her nickname would inevitably become "Meringue"—if they could cleverly derive "Renge" from it then that would be quite fortuitous, but rather than bet on a miracle like that, the correct decision would be to not present myself as a weirdo in the first place.

My intention was to act cutesy by saying my hobby was making sweets, but when I tried to show off a strong point of mine, my thought process got out of whack.

Calm down; there's no need to make people think I'm a girl who has weird opinions… well, it might become necessary in certain situations, but I'm not obligated to present my idiosyncrasies to classmates I'll only have for a single month.

Uneventful.

My first priority is to make it to graduation without any of the hardships I encountered at Naoetsu High School; I don't need to display my idiosyncrasies, I need to temper and conceal their presence.

I have to get down from the conspicuous position of transfer student as quickly as possible—I don't need any of those "transfer student tropes" you see all the time in manga.

It's going to be all right. I'm cute, under normal circumstances.

It's true that I've been through hell, but the only person who's hit me in the face is Hitagi Senjougahara.

I actually had some friends at Naoetsu High School. A boy even confessed to me. If I can just keep silent, I should at least be able to meet the vague expectations people have of transfer students.

Just by wearing a uniform, my apparently abnormal fashion sense can be smoothed over.

I just have to avoid doing anything stupid.

Nice to meet you; my name is Sodachi Oikura. I'm sorry for disturbing you by transferring partway through the term. It seems like

graduation will be here before we know it, but even so, I look forward to working with you as a member of the class.

That's it. The right banality. Aim to be normal.

Present yourself as harmless and unexceptional.

There's zero need to tell them that I revere the mathematician Euler, much less to request they call me that—I don't have to announce out loud all of the people I idolize.

They'll be disappointed.

"Try to be ordinary" is itself a fairly childish way of thinking, but this is probably what it means to become an adult—not feeling sorry for myself.

Let's rid ourselves of that unproductive self-pity.

As long as I consider myself unfortunate, I'll stay unfortunate my whole life—well, there's no question my life has been laughably unfortunate, no matter how you stretch it to try to interpret it positively. If you probe it too far, you won't want to solve the mystery, but rather to be put out of your misery.[2]

If anyone told me, "It's all in the way you look at things!", I'd kill them.

However, being unfortunate doesn't mean you can't find happiness. If I find happiness, I'll say "it's all in the way you look at things" too.

I'll rub it in his face.

I'll do anything for that.

…That said, no matter how worked up I get about it, I can't shake this deep-set feeling that's it's all futile, that it's all a waste of effort.

As you can see from my extraordinary disgust and outrageous hatred for him, Koyomi Araragi's presence within me is gigantic; however, the Sodachi Oikura inside of Koyomi Araragi is nothing more than one of many. Not even one of many—maybe nothing at all.

I don't know how many times he's forgotten me.

How many times he's ignored me, or pretended I didn't exist.

Come to think of it, that might have actually been a form of "special treatment", but that's no reason for me to accept it, and I think he's just fundamentally hopeless.

He's a hero who doesn't even remember the face of the person he saves—even if it's hard for me to understand, after everything I've been through, I have no choice but accept that people like that exist in the world.

It's not just him; all the members of the Araragi family are the same way, and I'm sure the Hakobe couple will be no exception—I'll never be able to be like that, though, nor do I want to be.

Even if I get past this misery and find happiness, he'll just

congratulate me with a cheerful, carefree “Good for you!”—that’s an extremely vexing prospect.

I ended up thinking about it.

What should I do, how would things have to happen for me to be able to argue him down? I shudder to think that he’ll just give me a pleasant and soothing response no matter what I do, and no matter what happens.

But there’s one thing of which I’m certain—absolutely certain. If that man found out that I’d become excessively isolated, or caused problems in my new school, he’d be very sad.

Nothing would bring me as much joy as making him feel bad, but, well, I’ve already done that stuff.

In a way, that would just be what he’d expect.

I don’t want him to think, “I guess that’s just the way she is.”

Doing well at my new school would be the best way to betray Araragi—the first step toward that goal is to “aim to be normal”.

With a smug look, I’ll let him know that being normal is the best way to happiness.

Resolving to make that happen, I arrived at Shishikurasaki Public High School, which was located three stops away from the Hakobes’ house.

Before even entering the school, I’d started mixing in with other students wearing the Shishikurasaki uniform on the way; they were unfamiliar… that is to say, these boys and girls seemed somehow different from the students at Naoetsu High School. It might just be my prejudice, but I sensed a certain calmness in their expressions.

At Naoetsu High School, a private, college-prep school, every last one of us was driven, myself included—everyone was on edge. Of course, I enrolled because I had wanted an environment like that, so I have no reason to be critical.

Can people really change this much just from being in a different environment? …I unconsciously started feeling envious and viewing my surroundings as hostile, but I realized what was happening and hurriedly got myself under control.

This is no good.

I can easily develop an inferiority complex toward anyone and everyone; it’s my worst aspect. I know that.

I construct myself by envying others.

How to put it… It takes a lot of courage to accept that you’re a good-for-nothing person, which is a pretty sad thing in the first place, but that’s probably just what I need right now.

No doubt everyone feels that way to some extent, but as long as I keep thinking this way, I’ll never advance even a single step forward.

It's as if I'm standing still, facing backwards.

If you perceive anything and everything to be a competition or a struggle, you'll constantly build up stress. And besides, there's no way the students at this school get on without any stress.

It's not possible.

Stress always starts to build up when people are gathered together, which gives rise to discord. That's precisely why I mustn't be careless.

My isolation in that classroom at Naoetsu High School was due more to arrogance than carelessness, but if I'm negligent, I'll end up committing the same ugly mistakes all over again.

It's not unlikely I'll become a hikikomori again—we might not understand each other yet, but I don't want to make the Hakobes regret taking me in.

I don't know what the future holds.

I think it would be terribly shameless for a freeloader like me to try to go on to college after graduating high school—but actually, such a future is possible for me if I make full use of subsidies and student loans. Those safety nets are strung throughout the world; I just couldn't see them—no, I hadn't even tried to see them.

Naturally, it's hard to feel blessed based on that knowledge alone, but at the very least, I suppose I'm lucky to have been born in a place like this… So, I've got to get the most out of it that I can.

Standing in front of the school gates, lost in thought, I began to feel like I was being glanced at repeatedly by passersby; it might be excessive self-consciousness, or my persecution complex, or perhaps there was something odd about the way I was wearing my uniform.

Although I knew that I was just being looked at for being a nuisance and a bother by obstructing passage, I got an urge to look in a mirror, and in my effort to escape I hastily stepped toward my new school.

It was a disappointing way to take my first step.

In the end, when I introduced myself for the first time to my new comrades, it was less a bright, sunny moment in the spotlight and more of a cloudy, overcast debut; it was difficult to say I did well–if anything, it was a massive failure, certainly not any kind of success.

I tried my best to be ordinary, and I hadn't planned to display any eccentricities, but before I managed to struggle to the end of my script, I got disgracefully flustered. I'm sure there's no small number of students who think my name is "Oshikura" now.

Bathing in the stares of 40 people, I was overcome with stage fright, my tongue went round and round in snarles, and my voice became shamefully shrill and hollow–I don't know how many words I flubbed during my self-introduction.

It was more words than I managed to get right.

I was so embarrassed, I wanted to lean over to avoid eye contact–I'd like to praise myself for at least being able to stay standing upright until the very end.

I did well. At not doing well, that is.

This isn't how I wanted to remember it… That it had ended up like this despite the perfectly plausible plan I had developed beforehand seemed more embarrassing than anything.

But this is how I am now.

If I'm surrounded by a crowd of people, when they all look at me, it seems like they're finding fault, and I can't hold onto my sanity.

It's starting to feel like everyone's laughing at my big failure–calm down, regain your composure. In reality, even though I've become the target of that laughter for my comical stuttering, it's not like I'm being showered in scorn. It's not like there's any more ill will in that laughter–those boys and girls are only laughing in amusement.

I'm being made fun of just the proper amount.

In the first place, I had only wanted to handle my self-introduction flawlessly (though it was a failure), and even though I had wanted to be told, "You're so good at making speeches," not to mention pampered for my success, it wasn't like I wanted to become a popular person in the class.

Hadn't I learned well in my previous school that that kind of fighting for a brittle hegemony was so very foolish?

Get some self-control, analyze yourself.

Just like when solving a tricky, complicated math problem, it becomes simple when you follow the procedure and apply the formula, I can arrange all of this like data.

The reason why I become obstinate when facing this crowd, and why I freeze up in front a large number of people, is that I'm

scared of these boys and girls.

If a crowd of conspirators form up to wield violence against me, I'd be at my wit's end all by myself–but it's all right. No one is going to hit or beat me here. There aren't that many crazy people who would get up and kick me because I messed up my self-introduction–and besides, since I'd be frightened of humiliation, it's fine if I don't stand at the top of the group.

Rather, because I'm guilty of trying to force myself to the top, I was driven out by the group–I need to understand that I am not a person who can give orders to a crowd, nor stand above them.

At least, not anymore.

I have a bad personality. I'm uncooperative. I degrade myself. I'm spiteful. I'm jealous. I'm distrusting. I'm charmless. I have a powerful victim complex. I'm hysteric. I'm a fool who boasts of intelligence. I'm a masochist. I'm easily intoxicated by my own misfortune. I blame anything and everything on others–on Araragi.

Fundamentally, there's no way someone like that could become a popular person just by doing somewhat well with their self-introduction–after all, it would be improper to somehow use my status as an end-of-term transfer student as a veil to mask my own ugly nature.

There's no such thing as magic, and people don't suddenly change like that. I moved to a different city, I'm living in a different house, going to a different school, wearing a different uniform–but it's not as if I've changed.

I am me, and that skin doesn't come off.

Fine, fine.

Taking a disappointing first step toward a new life, I ended up stumbling spectacularly, but I can't say I completely fell over–I didn't flip over the teacher's desk, or grab anything and throw it, or scratch on the blackboard to hide the shame of my failure. I didn't suddenly start bawling, or throw anything at the homeroom teacher. I didn't follow up my failure with an even bigger failure by taking off my uniform on the spot.

See, I evaded the worst possible situation.

If I say so myself, I feel as though I'm taking negative thinking to the limit by hypothesizing all these terrible situations, but I have simply no idea what I'll achieve by chasing it all the way to the end. Because at any rate, in the end my thoughts became obstinate, as jumbled up and wild as the time I exposed myself in fancy pajamas in front of the man I despise.

Thinking about it, what did it matter that I wasn't I at least able to say my name correctly–certainly, I was unexpectedly embarrassed, but I wasn't trying to look cool or anything (I am truly

glad I didn't talk about meringues–if I had, I fear I might have really gone crazy), and anyhow, I lost face in front of classmates I'd only be with for one short month.

It's fine if I cast aside this shame.

Looking forward, past graduation, I can think of this as rehabilitation–if I couldn't deal with feeling ashamed, then I couldn't very well go out into society.

I'm afraid of becoming an adult while still possessing this personality. Right now, I'm 18 years old–I'm an age at which I've even been afforded the right to vote. It would certainly be a terrible thing if I haven't yet become something of a better person by the time I'm 20–no, at least by the time I'm 22.

While I definitely can't say anything specific about how I'll end up, if I stay the cruel character that I am, it seems like sooner or later I'll commit a crime against society and get thrown in jail–I have to sever this chain of events before that.

It'd be good to break that off now.

The reasons why I'm misfortunate are innumerable, and there are infinite reasons why I'll be misfortunate from now on–however, there's not a single reason why I can't become happy.

…For that matter, by no means is everything about this failure today purely bad. After all, from looking at my classmates, who thought I seemed odd after I flubbed my self-introduction, I could sense the general atmosphere of the class into which I'd transferred.

I could study their reactions after providing a moderate stimulus.

As I expected–it's different from Naoetsu High School.

For better or for worse, it felt like a standard so-called "school"… though I'd only experienced a very short high school life, if I were to compare the two high schools, the mood here felt closer to my time in junior high.

Since a lot of people have been crammed into a narrow space, there's no doubt people here (especially people like me) felt stressful, but just as I'd thought, the stress here seemed different from at Naoetsu High School.

No.

What's different might be the rules.

I felt as though the customs of this classroom differed in composition from those of that previous classroom–in a way, just because the deviation score was high at Naoetsu High School, the rules were reflected in the hierarchy of students.

To explain it another way, however much of a good person you were, however strong your sense of justice, a man like Koyomi Araragi, for example, would be treated as the lowest type of person

just for having poor grades. Even in the case of the reckoning I received at that classroom trial, it was still a trial held concerning grades–at the time, I had thought that it was a proper, ordinary school function that could be held anywhere, but thinking about it now, it was probably a highly unique event.

Since Shishikurasaki High School was also a school trying to prepare students for college, I probably couldn't say that grades contributed nothing to students' social standing, but more than grades, it seemed more like human relationships that were the relevant factor.

For one, it didn't seem like bringing smartphones to school had been prohibited–such a thing had been altogether unthinkable at Naoetsu High School–and it seemed that communication prowess was an exceptionally important part of survival in this class. I fear that just having good grades might have the opposite effect, and could end up making me hated–what I ought to focus on was my charm as a person.

…It's good that I realized that early in the process, however, for me, that information nearly left me in despair.

The reason is, well, that I could say I'm a professional at lacking charm–I could certainly brag that I wouldn't lose to any run-of-the-mill charm-lackers.

That, at least, hadn't been revealed by my stuttering self-introduction, but if I stay without a plan to counteract it, there's no doubt my true nature will eventually be exposed. They say that when in Rome, do as the Romans do, but that's such an unbearable regulation.[3]

It's overly strict.

On the other hand, I am not a reformer trying to propose revisions to the rules here–my social standing is that of a newcomer. Although I'm repeating myself, I'll only be here for a short time.

This was just a short, one-month sojourn into a different country with utterly different laws. It would be best to pass this time by concealing myself, lowering my head and squeezing myself in so as to not conflict with the local culture–so to that end…

While thinking of that goal, a peaceful, uneventful, no-trouble and stress-free high school life, for a brief moment, my eyes fell on one particular student among my 40 classmates–or more correctly, 41 classmates.

Seat number 41.

Her name was Amiko Yurugase.

When forming groups of 2, groups of 3, even groups of 4, there's always a man left out–being the man left out was, of course, a specialty of the Araragi whom I despise; however, since you never know when such a situation might befall you, it's better to keep a clear head and think of how best to avoid being the odd one out: always have a partner in mind for a possible group of 2.

It's a purely academic theory, but…, if I had a partner like that, then I'd obviously always form a group of 2 with them, and it'd be reassuring to pair with them when forming groups of 3 and groups of 4 as well.

I wouldn't fail to find a group and get left out, and even if it feels like "there aren't enough people to go around," my feelings of isolation should weaken. That's what I think.

It would be a bit too high of a hurdle for a vagrant like me to suddenly become friendly with all 41 of my classmates, but if there's just a single person among the 40 that I can easily get along with… I wouldn't quite say 'easily', but I don't know how I could manage anything else if I weren't able to at least complete a low-level task like this.

Well, strictly speaking, it's not 'a single person among the 40', but a single person among the 20-ish–in this case, I couldn't imagine finding a boy to become friends with. I could even say my thinking would run in the opposite direction–at Naoetsu High School, boys and girls were mixed together, or rather boys and girls were socially equal, or rather, at least, boys and girls were mixed together on the seating chart; however, at Shishikurasaki High School, the seats in the classroom were clearly split down the middle between boys and girls.

It's based on an old-fashioned custom…, at least, that's what it looked like to me, but I suppose this was very normal for most co-ed schools.

So, in this kind of atmosphere, a girl trying to form a group of 2 with a boy would just negatively stand out; there'd be no benefit–the result would simply be drawing animosity upon myself, as a new girl trying to butter up the boys.

A girl flirting with a boy…, I could say that might just be a misunderstanding of how my situation with Araragi began, but it would certainly be harsh if I had to pass the next month with people thinking of me like that…, no matter where I was, someone like me would doubtless fall into hysterics. To be frank, I fear it would bring about some kind of bloody event.

So, the partner with whom I ought to make friends will be someone among the 20 or so girls who make up half the class's

population–rather than saying that would be fortunate, it might possibly be the ordinary thing to do for a normal high school student, but even though the size of this new class was at least as large as my old class, it seemed like the girls' influence was stronger than the boys'. For that matter, it seemed difficult to say that it was utterly different from the strong sense of equality at Naoetsu High School, but… well, it should certainly be better to align myself with the more influential side.

Of course, this is simply a rationalization after the fact, but my bungled self-introduction also allowed my attention to be caught by the student I selected.

The target with whom I ought to become friends.

I fear that may lead to that "Look, it's the transfer student!" reaction I was dreading earlier, but–as I expected, as a transfer student, the first time I start a conversation with a classmate is momentous. That isn't an exaggeration; I fear that my daily life will be decided just from that.

Will I start talking with a student who seems kind, or will I start talking with a student whose tastes and interests seem to match mine, or will I start talking with a leader-like person…, as I'd investigated beforehand (I did investigate), there was a line of strategy and procedure to establish my personal safety by deliberately becoming closer to a group of left-out delinquents, but it appears that Shishikurasaki High School, the same as Naoetsu High School, had no obvious delinquents. The level of public morals seemed to have ensured there were no girls shortening their skirts, nor any boys unfastening their jackets–it might be more wholesome than at Naoetsu High School, where you could be forgiven for letting your clothes get out of shape if your grades were good. If I were to break the atmosphere and speak honestly about my impression, it was so overly wholesome as to be suffocating, even to a person as serious–if not plain 'stiff'–as me.

Well, even if there were a group of delinquents, I don't think I'd be shrewd enough to curry favor by imitating them–if I were me from long ago, I might have been able to ignore appearances and do it, but now, it's fair to say I'd be the absolute worst at doing something like that.

…No, if I were me from long ago, I wouldn't have come up with all these various plans in the first place. I'd have worked out a more audacious plan. It's not like this was my first experience of transferring schools–I transferred away from the school I'd been attending back in junior high, but at that time it was more, how to put it, more of something I decided for myself. Maybe it was just desperation, but–before I'd experienced that classroom trial at Naoetsu

High School, I had a strong competitive spirit.

I was a junior high schooler, after all.

Right now, it's impossible for me to behave the same way as I did back then–I'm barely managing to hold on to my mentality as a human, and it's as if I'm just a hollow paper decoration on the inside.

Ah, even that might not be a paper decoration, but a balloon–all it takes is a light poke, and it explodes with a loud noise; I'm just like that. Although, 'balloon' being written as if it were a boat that moves with the wind, using that word here seems excessively romantic.[4]

Even if I were able to do that, in the end I would likely just repeat the same failures as always–in order to put an end to this period of my life, with all of its failures, it's essential for me to compromise.

If I were to speak of compromises I'd have to make, they would probably be… well, fine.

Anyway.

Let's set about this objective without making any waves.

Start with one person, and be friends with the whole class by graduation… that would be unreasonable, of course, but I'll make at least five, or even six friends. I'll make as at least as many friends as I have fingers.

I'm going to do well.

I'll get along in the world.

I'll live a peaceful, normal life in this peaceful, normal school–thus, after much deliberation, I selected my candidate for friendship. She was the classmate I'd noticed as I was stuttering my name: Amiko Yurugase.

Of course, the reason I chose her wasn't necessarily unrelated to the simple fact that the seat I'd been assigned was close to hers, but that was a secondary, if not a tertiary reason.

The reason I'd chosen her as my first target was more severe and straightforward–that is, it was because it seemed like she was being cut off from the rest of the class.

It was hard to tell from a glance, and the homeroom teacher hadn't seemed to notice (or might just be pretending not to notice), but as far as a transfer student and outsider like me could see at a glance, she was being separated from the class.

Isolation.

So, it wasn't difficult to imagine that she would always be left out when the class formed groups of 2–since 41 was a prime number, it was certainly an easy thing for people to be left over.

If that's the case, then I'm sure she would be glad that the class population has increased by one–honestly, taking advantage of her

weakness like that doesn't feel that bad, and while it's not a praiseworthy behavior, I need to use every means available to me.

It would be a bit blunt to say, 'Since we're both friendless, let's be friends,' but looking at it from the point of view of supply and demand, for Amiko Yurugase, building that kind of mutually beneficial relationship shouldn't be at all disadvantageous.

It would surely be a sweet symbiosis.

Only thinking about loss and gain and advantages and disadvantages in this situation seems like a basic character trait of mine, but even so, I can't help but delay making a decision.

Well, in this world, there are people who would raise their own estimations of their value as a person for proactively starting a conversation with an isolated classmate, but I'd like to think that that kind of person doing that kind of thing is more of a self-supporting proactive endeavor–I'm sorry, but I just don't have time to help people.

I'm different from that man, who'll eagerly sacrifice himself even if he can't afford to–I'm uncertain whether I even ought to treat myself as a victim.

Actually, there's something I think about once in a while.

Like maybe, in reality, I committed suicide a long, long time ago, and what I'm seeing now are just vague hallucinations on the verge of death–though if that's the case, if I'm about to die, I should at least have a more pleasant fantasy, right?

Even in my fantasies, I'm in hell.

No matter how I think about it, the idea that happiness and misfortune just depend on how you look at things is complete nonsense without an ounce of reason, but it's probably true that you can't lead a good life if you don't have a good self-image–if that's the case, even though I have no intention of thinking of myself as a girl with a kind spirit because I ignored the atmosphere in the classroom and called out to an isolated classmate at my new school, maybe doing that will help.

Well… I'm sure that's what that class rep, Tsubasa Hanekawa, would do if she were here. Though I have absolutely no intention of following that borderline monstrous honor student's example.

I might really die if I tried to do that.

… What I mean by that is, how to put it, those "eccentrics" like Tsubasa Hanekawa and Koyomi Araragi that you invariably see around at Naoetsu High School, wouldn't be found at this school.

After all, regardless of whether they want to or not, those kinds of idiosyncratic people don't end up in an honest place like this–or no, I suppose they were peculiar types even at Naoetsu High School.

Obviously, Amiko Yurugase didn't seem like that at all.

As a girl who was isolated from the class, at least according to that aspect of her by itself, I could classify her the same way as that girl Hitagi Senjougahara; however, I can't help but say I rather lack the knowledge to make such a categorization–she was like that when we were first years, but she was a curious type of high school girl who isolated herself of her own volition.

I say this confidently because I have experience being a hikikomori, but people who truly prefer solitude wouldn't come to school in the first place–well, when I met her again a little while ago, it seemed she'd somewhat mellowed out.

If that damned Araragi had changed Hitagi Senjougahara, that's a fact I couldn't at all say about myself–was there even a chance for me to change like that? If there was, I don't know how many times I've missed it.

No.

There's no question that this, right now, is the chance Araragi gave me–in that case, this time, I won't let this opportunity get away.

So, I will become friends with Amiko Yurugase. I'll do it.

First, I need to concentrate any and all of my excessive enthusiasm on that goal.

…Thinking about what will happen afterward, if I end up expending all of my energy and burning all of my calories just trying to make a single friend, that might be the origin of my next failure; but, just like during that classroom trial, as always, whatever I'm guilty of doing, I'm trying to do the right thing.

Thinking you're mistaken doesn't mean you're mistaken.

Thinking you'll be unfortunate doesn't mean you'll be unfortunate.

Even if that hope is barely there.

As I said before, I knew of no common points between Amiko Yurugase and Hitagi Senjougahara except that they were isolated; however, once I approached Amiko Yurugase to talk, I couldn't help but remember the time when I first spoke with Hitagi Senjougahara.

I ended up using past exam questions as a reference.

Even though I shouldn't be using references.

Although this is purely my own intuition, in this world, there are special people who can't be described beyond saying that they are "special people", and Hitagi Senjougahara was one of those–though I wouldn't necessarily go that far (strictly speaking, that probably just describes people like Tsubasa Hanekawa), even so, I ought to reflect on what it means to be someone in that category of "special".

With the exception of Araragi (to me, everything about that man is an exception), I should have broken off completely from Naoetsu High School at this point, but even so, I couldn't forget the intense impression that girl left me: ephemeral, with a weak constitution.

As if she were really ephemeral with a weak constitution. A little while ago, on my first day of school after returning from being a hikikomori, she punched me so hard I was sent to the infirmary… However, my strong impression is not entirely due to that incident.

Special people.

Of course, I don't intend to keep rattling on endlessly about what makes special people special–it's just that I can't help but feel jealous.

As you know, I am a person who was unable to become special to anyone–I couldn't become special to Araragi, and I couldn't become special to my mother… I can't even say I'm special to myself–but that's alright now.

Since I'm not special, I can aim for mediocrity.

If I can't at least do that, I won't become anything.

But, even so, I ended up thinking about it.

There are not very many people like Tsubasa Hanekawa or Koyomi Araragi–each of them is a single rarity among a million.

I knew the emptiness of the words, "All people are equal," from seeing people of their ilk, but actually, because people who give off that kind of intense individuality are one in a million, it would be difficult to even encounter one, let alone become one.

That opportunity has probably passed me by already.

…By no means is having a relationship with a special person a purely positive influence on your life, either. I wonder how many hapless ordinary people have gotten carelessly involved with special

people, and ended up manipulated, exploited, abused, and discarded.

Thinking of the perils of being blinded by the special radiance of special people, the prudent choice would be to consider those men and women a risk to one's person and stay away from them.

This isn't manga.

It's not a world where it's fine if your character stands out–I mustn't forget that no matter how a manga protagonist acts in a story, in the end that's still antisocial behavior.

It's interesting to read for pleasure, but trying to act like that in the real world would be a disaster–somehow or other, I've ended up speaking about nothing but my jealousy after all; however, instead of complaints and grumblings about those men and women, what I've been pondering is rather, how did special people become special in the first place?

I'm always flustered by the argument that, "Although they went through the same unpleasant experiences as me, since they honestly did their best despite that, I ought not to sympathize with them just because of their unfortunate upbringing," but if I were to interpret it statistically–that is, mathematically–even though it's difficult for me understand, I suppose I have no choice but to recognize that those words carry certain amount of truth.

I wonder where I could find someone who grew up being abused by a good-for-nothing family like me, but honestly did their best and grew up to become great–well, that's alright.

But, by the same logic, it seems there's a considerably dubious reason for why special people are special, though it's one that's most like me to talk about.

That would be, that those men and women are special because they're blessed.

Born in a good area and a good family.

Meeting good people.

Having rare talents, afforded opportunities to work hard–but looking at it logically, those things weren't special at all; they were commonplace affairs that happen all the time.

However deeply you read the trifling autobiography of a great person that's spread like a disease through bookstores, however faithfully you implement the lessons written inside, you can't replicate the same success–even if you vicariously experience the same things as that special person, it's not like you can become special yourself.

There are certainly rebellious people who can't adjust to society and end up committing crimes, despite being born in a good area, born in a good family, meeting good people, having rare talents, and being afforded opportunities to work hard.

Statistically, mathematically, they definitely exist.

When I talk about committing crimes, that would certainly be extreme and excessive cases, but that doesn't change the fact that most people just can't become special–so, really, just when, where, and for what reason do special people become special people?

Perhaps, if an abject failure of a person like me is just a statistical anomaly on the low end of the scale–then are those men and women just statistical anomalies on the high end of the scale?

I could even think about it from the perspective of evolutionary biology–it might not be a statistical anomaly, but rather a genetic mutation.

Those men and women had been made special for no particular reason, but simply represented an advanced form of human existence–that's a bit of an exaggeration, but if I were to think of it like that, I could comprehend it just a little bit. I could restrain my raging inferiority complex.

I'd feel better if someone had told me sooner, clearly, that there was no particular reason for those anomalies–that I don't have to sympathize with the misfortune of misfortunate people, and that I shouldn't aspire to being special like special people are. Someone like me can be helped just by having someone reassuringly declare that.

Although, in my case, it might be better to describe myself as a malfunction instead of an anomaly… As a failed human who hasn't been disposed of yet, I have to watch out. I have to be careful.

Hitagi Senjougahara's special nature, Tsubasa Hanekawa's genetic evolution, and Koyomi Araragi's exceptionalism are all things that could only be found at Naoetsu High School–those kinds of characters wouldn't appear in Shishikurasaki High School.

From now on, for the foreseeable future, the type of people I have to deal with are especially ordinary, overwhelmingly ordinary boys and girls like Amiko Yurugase.

I, Sodachi Oikura, am the embodiment of an inferiority complex, a problem child doubly troubled with servility and self-denial–and yet, I look upon everyone with hostility, and on top of that, I can viciously cast aside their individuality and human rights without batting an eye.

Looking at it objectively, I can only belong to the absolute lowest class of humanity–if I were somebody else, I would simply detest a person like me. Because even though I am myself, I still detest myself considerably. I have no doubt about that.

I hadn't intended to think badly of the isolated Amiko Yurugase, but I certainly hadn't anticipated some kind of optimistic outcome in which she welcomed me with open arms when I greeted her–however, I can't deny that that I'd thought it would be easier than when I'd first spoken to Hitagi Senjougahara.

Rather, I'd imagined it more like the time I squared off with Tsubasa Hanekawa–balancing out the possibilities like that, I'd found a way to ease the difficulty of the mission in my mind. Therefore, my struggle with Amiko Yurugase was likely due to my own weakness and my own fragility.

My own fragility, my own riskiness.

My own personality–that damn unpleasant thing.

Whenever people are appraised and ranked, my own place in the hierarchy would be that of a dog, wouldn't it.

That's why I was given the utterly charmless nickname "How Much". It was some kind of pun on my surname Oikura, but I suppose having people call me "Euler", after the mathematician I revere, is still just a dream within a dream, isn't it.[5]

Well, being revered by someone like me is probably just bothersome to Euler-sensei–anyway, setting that aside, my greeting with Amiko Yurugase did not go well.

I don't want to say it, but it went about as badly as I could have imagined.

It's not like I "stuttered" like I did during my self-introduction–rather, I tried even harder not to. Even though I summoned up the guts required for someone like me to get to that point, when I started talking, curiously, the tension started increasing.

I fear the cruel battle I went through at Naoetsu High School may still be affecting me in evil ways. I hadn't noticed it, likely because I'd thought I'd attained extraordinary negotiation prowess–I was a fool for harboring such a delusion even for a moment.

Hm, actually, I don't think those days when I dealt with all those special people in succession were entirely useless. If it weren't

for that, I wouldn't have come here in the first place–so, even if it's a tiny amount, I think I've grown just a little.

I didn't haughtily press her for a response, I didn't intend to deceive her, and with reasonably honest words, I tried to get close to Amiko Yurugase.

With a modest, non-servile attitude.

But–she rejected my compromise.

She rejected it quite strongly.

It was a reaction I hadn't anticipated–since the situation could be seen by the rest of the class, I can't even begin to explain the enormous degree of embarrassment I felt at that time.

It's strange I didn't get violent.

Maybe that was because on top of feeling embarrassed, I was rendered dumb in mute amazement–anyhow, after ignoring me when I'd started talking, Amiko Yurugase had stood up in the middle of my speech and exited the classroom.

I was rejected in such a conspicuous manner.

I couldn't even believe how excessively flagrant it was–even if she was rejecting my conversation, surely there was a better way to do it.

When I'd approached Hitagi Senjougahara in the same way, she was content with casually engendering an atmosphere of, "Please don't speak to me, I like being alone"; as expected, it would be too much to request the same kind of thing now, but… even if she didn't like being spoken to, there should be at least one method of amicable rejection that didn't involve hurting me.

Why did she hurt me?

What was it, how to put it, ah…, it's a lot like me, isn't it. Falling into hysterics and behaving irrationally, wrecking things–fragile, dangerous me.

Well, if I were her, I wouldn't have conscientiously returned to the classroom for the next lesson after break time was over (I might not have come back to school at all), but anyway, the phenomenon that really occurred was Amiko Yurugase running away from a transfer student's attempted conversation without so much as a glance.

Describing this chain of events from the point of view of a classmate, the transfer student had blundered through her self-introduction, tried to pursue friendship with an isolated classmate, and had her offer of fellowship rather harshly refused.

What a disgrace.

Since it was my first day as a transfer student, surely there was a limit to the degree of failure I could commit–maybe they'd written off my flubbed self-introduction, but I wonder if I was just covering

for my failure with an even bigger failure.

As for why she did it, perhaps that girl knew of my evil ways at Naoetsu High School–that's the only reason I could think of for such a dramatic and extreme reaction.

She'd left that place, and tried to cut herself off from the years past, but even so, my multitude of unforgivable deeds were still etched into her mind–no, no, there's certainly no way that's true.

If that was the case, they wouldn't have been laughing when I stuttered through my self-introduction. The class as a whole would have ostracized me as a social deviant from the start.

Since that sort of development hadn't occurred, that girl must have had her own reasons to run away.

Amiko Yurugase's own reasons.

…For some reason, when I put it in words it becomes fairly obvious; it was regrettable that I couldn't get my head around that before, but I was only thinking of her position in the classroom as a "state of isolation". I hadn't given more than a passing thought to the question of "why is she being isolated?" in the first place.

Just goes to show my ignorance of human relationships.

I felt ashamed, true, but I ought to feel especially ashamed of my lack of preparation in that regard; I was astounded, true, but I ought to feel especially astounded at my own rudeness.

Be ashamed, be astounded, die.

I looked at someone who was alone and carried out a superficial judgment like "Since it doesn't look like they have many friends, it'll be easy to make friends with them", so really, I'm the kind of person who should just die. Then, Araragi should just die. Die, Araragi!

There was no logical connection there, but I recovered my sense of tranquility just a little by envisioning Araragi's death; however, what I ought to have thought about before committing my huge failure was the reason why a student would seem to not have many friends.

I'm not a great detective, and there's no way I can infer the answer just from a glance, but I should have been able to make a rough judgment that the reason a student doesn't seem to have many friends is very likely to be because it's difficult to make friends with them.

That's how it was with me, that's how it was with Araragi.

People who find it hard to make friends, and are hard to be friends with, can't really be called special; they can generally be found in great numbers–there would be nothing strange about Amiko Yurugase also being one of them.

I had approached and tried to become acquainted with her

without realizing that, without it even occurring to me–it was just sinful.

If it's a sin to try to make friends with someone like that, then I've received sufficient punishment already–the label of "Tried to make a friend with everyone watching, and got turned down" will probably become a large obstacle in my life from now on. Blech.

Analyzing this calmly, there was nothing I could do–even if I'd pretended to be a tactician and try to work out a strategy, after all, I was feeling nervous about being at a new school, and had lost my balance after bungling my self-introduction.

It would have been better if I'd used my status as a transfer student to the maximum and just silently remained seated–if I did that, maybe a highly observant leader-like person would have started talking to me.

That's right. Seeing the transfer student nervous and thereby creating tension all around her would be a situation those boys and girls would try to resolve, so they'd take a keen interest in me.

They'd try to investigate in order to learn my true character; in that case, I'd hide my true self, and I'd be happy if I could have kept it hidden for a long time.

But that passive attitude isn't a part of my personality–taking action, and wanting to cut through times of trouble yourself; those are the courageous enterprises of special people, but for an incompetent like me, they're just dangerous bad habits.

That means that I'm unable to seek help when I need it–that's how I arrived to this point, by cleverly (and clumsily) slipping through the safety nets that had been laid out in this harmonious world.

Coming up with plans to help myself, and failing.

When I was in junior high, Araragi didn't save me–but now, I earnestly believe that if I hadn't taken that unnecessary course of action, contrary to what I'd expected at the time, things would have turned out differently.

If I were to say that my pride doesn't allow me to accept help from anyone, then that would be quite a foolish pride indeed. If someone were to teach me how to be sensible about this, I'd take the initiative and abandon that line of thinking right away. However, a stylish line like 'protecting my pride means I can't protect myself as a person,' is something a special person would say.

…But, maybe, could Amiko Yurugase have thought like that as well? In other words, she saw the transfer student come up to talk with her, but it seemed more like jumping out at her–that is, wouldn't such improper behavior seem like a trap of some kind? And that might be what caused her to be cautious.

She was cautious about something. She was fighting

something.

If I believed that sort of thing was foolish when someone other than me does it, if I thought about it with myself in their place, I wouldn't have that kind of serious survival strategy–but however amusing it is to think about, it's beside the point.

She and I are different people, and this was always just in my imagination. There might be a completely different reason why Amiko Yurugase ignored me and rushed out of the classroom.

For instance, one line of reasoning is that she simply disliked me–it should have been our first time meeting, but I can't rule out the possibility that I provoked a terrible grudge in her at some point before. Just like Araragi had completely forgotten about me, and moreover, appeared to have absolutely no idea why I detested him so severely; I might have simply forgotten about her, too.

Since I have absolutely no faith in a person like me, it's hard to completely eliminate that possibility–well, I don't think it's very realistic, but I am a little suspicious of the time just after I'd transferred junior high schools, when I was particularly stubborn.

But, if I had the time to be fantasizing about that kind of miraculous reunion, I ought to be preparing an urgent plan to counteract the current situation.

If I blunder through the second half of my first day as a transfer student, I'd feel so disgraceful it'd be like my face was burning in shame. Before I pile any more shame on top of what I'm already suffering, I need to somehow figure out how to redeem my honor.

I won't say a ruined girl like me had any honor from the start, but if I resigned myself to this circumstance, I'd have no choice but to return from school like a soldier from a defeated army–it would be inexcusable to the Hakobe couple.

I have to do something.

Something.

…Pretending my masochistic feelings are actually somehow introspection, over and over, and in the end, repeating the same failures as always, is just the kind of person I am.

Here, what I ought to do is withdraw, not do anything unnecessary, and regain my posture–I'd been laughed at during my self-introduction, and then had been publicly humiliated in front of yet another group of people.

But, if I just behave meekly, there should be some way this could help me. The flip side of getting rejected by an isolated student is successfully getting numbered among the majority. Even though that's a bit of a far-fetched argument, it's definitely something I could say.

Deeming Amiko Yurugase as an enemy, a so-called “common enemy”, might make me join together with the rest of the class–but letting this chance slip away entirely would certainly show the true colors of career unfortunate Sodachi Oikura.

Eager to be liked by people, but trampling on their good will–that would be because, fundamentally, I don’t really believe in good will. I’ve ended up thinking that it’s hatred, much more than good will, that I can believe in.

Well, that’s a way of speaking with a stylish air, an excuse with a stylish air, but even aside from that, I feel like I just can’t go along with being a part of the majority, I feel like I just can’t accept their pity. I’m overflowing with “little me’s”.

Creeping and crawling.

Trying to recover from my failures, those “little me’s” will surely be the source of even more failure–although the herd of “little me’s” all moved according to their own wishes, strangely, it had gathered up like an army.

This time, the point of attack they were aiming for, each and every one of them, was Amiko Yurugase, the isolated girl–really, then, for someone like me, I guess it can’t be helped.

‘I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to hurt you, Oikura-san. I couldn’t reply to your kind words, because there was an unavoidable situation beyond my control. I won’t do something like that again, so please forgive me. If it’s not too late now, could we be friends? I’ll call you Sodachi from now on, okay? Actually, will you let me call you Euler, please?’

…Since I wanted Amiko Yurugase to confirm whether or not she was at fault, I just can’t help imagining stuff like that. For me, it’s unavoidable.

Having to keep company with a hopeless person like me for your whole life would surely be cruel and unusual punishment, I think–though, about that, surely there was just one person who could put up with me for at least one month.

It would make for an unpleasant memory, but there wouldn’t be any lasting damage, right?

But Amiko Yurugase didn’t even consider it. When I bravely approached her at the next break period, she ignored me again. It felt like we were walking down a road, and she kept ignoring the facecloth I was trying to give her–like she had briskly walked ahead of me, and bluntly declared, "I have no intention of having any association with you.” Like she was running helter-skelter away from me as I hounded her. Saying "helter-skelter” is almost like I’m trying to keep the damage to my sullen, tattered heart to a minimum with a cutesy description, but actually, it would be more accurate to say she was “scattering in any and all directions like baby spiders”. She was just one person, but true to form as a baby spider, she wasn’t bothered by leaving me behind in pursuit–consequently, I got publicly humiliated once again, a third time, and a fourth time.

Well, speaking honestly, no matter what which time it was, if Amiko Yurugase had said even a single word to “deal with” me, I could have accepted that as the outcome and put an end to this whole thing.

Even if it’s not a success, if I could have experienced an outcome at all, I could give up–I would gallantly withdraw, change course and, as they say, look for a big tree when you need shelter.[6]

But, even as the introvert I am, I’ve ended up coming too far to back out now.[7] There’s no way I can lower this fist I’ve raised in the air.

No, if this situation persists, I’ll end up hitting myself in the head with my own fist–masochism and self-punishment and self-destruction and self-ruination.

Over and over and over and over and over.

Everything is self, self.

And it all becomes inconsequential–even if I could truly start over, my high-strung nature will make me abandon everything if even one small part of it goes wrong.

It's like I'm the same as a clean-freak who throws clothes away if they get just a little dirty–what a laughable thought, imagining someone as sullied as me as a clean-freak.

I've heard that people obsessed with cleanliness have a hard time keeping their rooms clean, contrary to what you might expect–since they don't want to get their own hands dirty, they can't clean up, and stuff–; if I'm a clean-freak, even though I ought to gallantly give up, I was being stubbornly particular about Amiko Yurugase.

Now that I think about it, I could say we're both making equally unpleasant memories; it was a situation in which both of us were intent on losing. What kind of mutual benefit had I been thinking of?

In the same way that I've been carrying on in a state of disgrace, at this point, it'd be fair to say I've been causing Amiko Yurugase a considerable amount of shame as well. According to Theater Troupe Oikura's comedic ad-libbing, that was something we would inevitably get involved in together, something we simply couldn't help but doing.[8]

Because, even for her, the choice to compromise with me and settle our relationship seemed like a good one; however, not once had she shown any sign of doing so.

In a state of communication failure, and having had nothing but one-sided conversations with her, we finally approached the end of school–in the plan I'd made this morning, I'd have found a companion; we'd have brought our desks together and eaten lunch together, and we'd have made friends as she was showing me around after school… but this was a good time to recheck the pre-established harmony of that kind of idealistic pipe dream.[9]

I was alone when I transferred here, and I was still alone after school–even though I'm a third year, maybe I could try to join a club… It was a pitiful outcome, and I just wanted to escape from reality.

I couldn't show my face. East, west, south, north, I couldn't show my face anywhere.

I'd tried to show that damned Araragi that people could change, but I ended up showing him that they couldn't change–even being frowned upon by my entire class, I end up worrying more about being seen by Araragi, who isn't even here.

If Araragi were here, I'd gouge out both of the bastard's eyes, enough to despair of myself.

But, even so, I didn't give up (give up already!).

After school today was my last chance. Biting my lip, as soon as end-of-day homeroom was over, I rushed over to Amiko Yurugase's seat. It was the fifth time today I'd tried to talk to her–however, it was as if she had anticipated my movements in advance. At the point I'd turned around to look, she had disappeared.

My strategy to use my position as a transfer student to ask her to show me around the school had, with this, come to nothing–my goodness, I'd even thought I'd forgive her for continuing to ignore me if she'd showed me around the school, and, even though I'd been shamelessly thinking I was doing her a favor here, with my personality growing more and more heinous… but this was already the fifth time she had run away from me, so I didn't just stand there dumbfounded.

Rather, because I'd just stood there dumbfounded the previous four times, I've had enough of looking like a fool–there's no next period to try again. I had no intention of being resigned to standing still.

I ran after her.

Given the situation, both the person herself and my classmates had probably started wondering why I was so fixated with Amiko Yurugase–in fact, as I might have expected, seeing me dash off carrying my bag, my classmates didn't laugh at all.

They saw me as a thoroughly strange person.

Quick-witted classmates surely might have suspected there was a connection between me and Amiko Yurugase in the past–but I'm sorry to say, that conjecture is wildly off the mark. If I were to speak of a fated partner with a past connection, in the end it would only be Araragi.

And so, although it naturally wasn't the same degree as Araragi, having been rejected so strongly over and over, I'd practically grown to hate Amiko Yurugase.

That intense indignation is what drove me to run.

Having her show me around after school, or possibly, going home from school together, wandering through town, even having tea, those kinds of idyllic plans were already gone from inside my head.

I'd even started feeling hostile, to the point where, if I caught up to her, I wanted to give her a remonstration and say, "That's enough already!"

I no longer intended to make friends with her, I simply wanted to forget my troubles and chase after her. Even if I said it was a malicious desire to cause trouble to Amiko Yurugase after she'd rejected me so completely that made me run, now that it's come to this, that might not actually be too far from the truth.

I want to thoroughly finish this affair.

But, with unexpected things, as always, I'm apt to struggle along with a fruitless effort; but just this one time, my approach did not wither, and at last had born fruit.

This was different from when I'd dealt with Araragi, Hitagi Senjougahara, or Tsubasa Hanekawa. It was a disappointing anticlimax, and I even felt maddeningly perplexed–around the stairway in the corridor I'd been running in, just like I thought, Amiko Yurugase's footsteps stopped.

Sternly crossing her slender arms in front of her chest, she was glaring at me aggressively–since I hadn't anticipated her "ambushing" me like that, as I might have expected, I faltered in the face of that piercing gaze.

It pierced me, and my feelings cooled down right away. Until a little while ago, I'd intended to pursue her to the ends of the earth, but now that I can catch up, I have no idea what I should do or what kind of face I should make.

By no means was I able to say something like "Enough already!"–objectively speaking, I was the one who needed to have that said to me.

But to me, being objective is even more difficult than turning into a bird or turning into a cat–maybe if it were turning into a dog, I could do it.

In a hierarchy of personal value, in the end, something that runs after things running away from it, actually, isn't that exactly what a dog is? Doesn't it feel like I've been chasing Amiko Yurugase around like a dog that wants to play with a toy? If something happens that it doesn't like, regardless of where it is or who it's with, it snaps at them; a stray dog, or if I don't choose my words carefully, a mad dog…, if a dog like me got emotionally attached to someone and forced them to play chase, it would be natural for a person like Amiko Yurugase to come greet me with a very angry expression–had she finally run out of patience? Rather, it might be better to say she was putting up with me quite well until now. Since she'd been able to endure being followed around by someone like me for a whole business day, perhaps, this isolated girl had a better personality than I'd thought… My head had cooled down quite a bit, and I started vaguely thinking like that, however.

'Yutheya.' Hearing that low, threatening voice, I suddenly came to my senses–hm? What? Huh? 'You dare?' Well, I was thinking I might have caused her some trouble. But 'you dare,' hm. What was that? She was angry, was that what it meant? Something like, 'How dare you follow me around all day?' Or, is that really what she said just now? She said 'how dare you?' Such a scathing vilification?

'What the hell aya doin, ya slow in the head?–you theah.'[11]

When she repeated it, I understood. Not 'you dare', but 'you theah', then–it was hard for me to understand because of the accent, but she wasn't insulting me, it was just a form of address. Wait, though, isn't 'slow in the head' clearly an insult?

But in this area's dialect, that might be an expression to praise how small my head was compared to my body, so I couldn't thoughtlessly fly into a rage. It'll be hard for me to live if I always jump to the wrong conclusion and take any and all words directed at me as attacks. I can't just take words at face value, I have to read between the lines–though if I draw out the nuance, even that "you theah" contained plenty of ill will, at least in my estimation.

'Even though I was obviously avoidin people, what the hell, you theah, ahya actually insane?'–if I turned that round and round in my head, it was like Amiko Yurugase, while glowering at me, was bluntly saying in her fluid accent that she hadn't really been ignoring me and refusing to speak with me.

…I couldn't speak very eloquently either, but contrary to her fragile appearance, Amiko Yurugase was a gruff speaker.

Well, no, since I'm not used to hearing her speak, I could be interpreting her as ruder than she really was, and it's obviously the dialect of this area; but, I had no experience in my life of being able to cope with an unfamiliar climate and culture.

To the point where if possible, I'd want an interpreter.

My head filled with self-centered thoughts, I ended up unconsciously thinking something like that, and it made me realize once again how thoroughly foreign I was to this place, as a transfer student.

'Come eeyeh.'

With that, without waiting for me to reply, Amiko Yurugase beckoned with her hand and started to go up the stairway–if we were leaving the school, we clearly would be going down the stairs, but in going up, it appeared that she was sparing some time to talk to me.

If we'd had a conversation here, we'd soon be running into the rest of the class, so it wasn't a strange idea to move to a different location.

However, there was room for consideration as to whether I should nonchalantly follow her movements–somehow or other, I'd felt a sense of danger from Amiko Yurugase's demeanor, so even moving in the opposite direction was not a strange idea either. I think that might even be the proper choice here.

If I were dealing with this properly, I ought to withdraw–speaking of which, it would likely be the adult decision to pull away at this time.

It would be the adult decision, the right course of action, the most lady-like solution–but even so, in this situation, I was unable to betray the expectations of all the people who believed that I couldn't make the adult decision, that I couldn't take the right course of action, and that I couldn't choose the most lady-like solution.

It wasn't because I wanted to know.

Why did Amiko Yurugase seem to have been avoiding me–and why she was being isolated in the class… It wasn't because I wanted to learn about her situation.

Honestly, I didn't want to get involved with something like that.

As someone who only thinks about herself, I don't have even one millisecond to spare for thinking of other people–there was only enough space in my heart to despise that detestable man to the utmost.

Don't misunderstand; truly, I haven't the slightest bit of interest in Amiko Yurugase–nevertheless, the reason I was going after Amiko Yurugase after she said something that I daresay meant, "Follow me," was that if I didn't, it would seem like I'd gotten scared and run away.

If I'd simply turned my back on her now, there's no way that could really be 'running away', and even if I did run, it wouldn't be running to escape but rather to seek refuge; but even though I acknowledged that in my head over and over, I began walking toward the stairway.

Like I'm wading into the muddy rivers of hell.[12]

Now that I think about it, the reason why I chose such a foolish course of action might have been because the dialect had confused me; as a paltry excuse, this was the first time in my life that I encountered such a dialect.

When I'd transferred junior high schools, I didn't go as far away as this, so I'd never had the experience of being bewildered by small differences in words–though of course, strictly speaking, the same words I used every day were still included in other dialects.

Even so-called "standard language" is, at its root, really just the dialect of a single region–that it's the "correct way to speak" is something of a collective illusion.[13]

I ought to keep in mind that it's my way of speaking that's the minority in this community–to me, Amiko Yurugase's way of speaking sounds rude (even allowing for any of her ill intentions), but to locals like her and the rest of the class, my way of speaking might be taken as a refusal to adjust to the area.

They'd snickered at me during my self-introduction, but even if I was able to get through it without stuttering, I might have still been laughed at after all–I suppose, as teenagers, they hadn't gotten many opportunities to hear a real live outsider's strange way of speaking.

It might be better to be thought of as a laughing stock than as a suspicious transfer student–but because of all the failures I keep committing, at this point, I've ended up turning even that "silver lining" meaningless.

I must be a prodigy at letting good fortune go to waste.

This might still be part of that cliched "Look, it's the transfer student!" reaction, but as I followed Amiko Yurugase up the staircase, it started to feel a bit like "disciplining the newcomer".

If that's the case, then could the reason for Amiko Yurugase's isolation in the class be that she's a delinquent? I couldn't say anything certain based on that short exchange just now, but this girl seemed to have a strong spirit, and on top of that, she seemed to be strong-willed; so that might be a perfectly realistic guess.

If that's the case, I've ended up accidentally making the choice to "become a member of the delinquent group" (though it wasn't really a group), but if that's the outcome, if I say so myself, it doesn't seem to be something I can praise myself for–rather, I want to reprimand myself.

Such a professional I am, making this kind of mistake.

Was I even aiming to be successful in the first place.

Setting aside the good and the bad of trying to curry favor with a powerful delinquent, it was a perfectly reasonable way of making

one's way in the world, but after I've almost made her hostile, since I can hardly claim to know what she's thinking… I can't even make my way through a puddle, can I.

Maybe she's gonna hit me. I don't want that.

I don't like violence, but I don't like having problems on my first day as a transfer student even more–regulations are probably more lax here than at a private school, but even at a public school you can get expelled and such.

Judging from what happened with Hitagi Senjougahara, perhaps I can keep my injuries to a minimum if I pretend to faint after being hit once, and I can try to get through this using that sort of technique…, though I don't think I have the acting talent to pull that off.

I might be able to play dead, though–I do already look like something that's dead.

While I was giving in and letting anxiety take me over, I finished climbing the stairs–we'd arrived on the roof of the school.

It was my first time in such a place, since the roof at Naoetsu High School had been off-limits–however, the scenery spread out before me here was different in some aspects to my mental image of a "school roof".

It was artificial grass of course, but the whole area seemed to have been made into a lawn, and surrounding the whole roof was a fence so tall it seemed impossible to climb over.

First of all, it seemed hard to commit suicide by jumping off the school here… My impression of it was less like a fall prevention fence and more like the inside of a cage at a zoo.

It wasn't just on the edges of the building; looking up at the sky, a fine mesh netting had been strung up overhead… did the administrators of this school think that teenage kids were liable to fly up into the sky?

No, that's not it.

The netting had been placed there so that students could play ball on the roof–somehow, it really felt like a city school.

But then, as far as I could tell, nobody was on the roof after school, and it was difficult to say that this valuable dead space was being effectively utilized–though they probably had never anticipated it being used as a place to summon a transfer student.

But she had done so, and with her back turned to me, Amiko Yurugase said, 'You theah, what ahya tryin to do–ya want somethin from me? It's not hahd to see I was avoidin people, so why ahya so pehsistant, eeh?', and, rattling on in her strong accent, honestly, I had absolutely no idea what she was saying.

I was preoccupied with being on an unfamiliar roof, and I was

also inexperienced with this dialect, but even before considering those things, she was just speaking too quickly for me to properly follow her.

If I were to cruelly misinterpret the situation, I might say that right now, Amiko Yurugase was feeling the same kind of tension I was–if I thought the shrillness of her voice indicated something like that, then this might turn out to be different than the stereotypical, “delinquent trying to knock some sense into an incautious transfer student who can’t read the atmosphere”.

If I were unversed in the ways of delinquents, that is.

Well, if that’s the case now, if someone were to inquire as to just what kind of situation I had gotten into, I couldn’t answer even if I thought about it… but then again, only thinking won’t help my situation much.

Or perhaps I should say, I’m concerned that I’ll seem defiant if I get too lost in thought–and it’s not like it’s been settled that Amiko Yurugase isn’t really a short-tempered, violent problem child.

Sucking up to a delinquent student wouldn’t be entirely impossible for me, but even so, I’ve decided that I need to do whatever I can, so, facing Amiko Yurugase, I said something to the effect of, 'Have I done something to annoy you?’ Since I don’t know what I might blurt out I speak imprudently and get fired up, I tried to talk as plainly as possible.

Confronted with that, Amiko Yurugase’s reply was something like, 'Don’t bullshit me, you wanna get dragged into this, idiot?’–her accent had slowed down a little, but that said, I wasn’t confident I was hearing her properly because of her rough way of talking. “Idiot”? Has anyone ever called me that to my face in my whole life?

Since Amiko Yurugase still had her back to me, strictly speaking she didn’t say it to my face, but from her tone of voice, it was like I was able to see through to her facial expression with 100% clarity.

I was picturing a very angry face.

But, while trying to have a conversation with her back turned, her posture was less of a posture and looked more like a pose for some reason; somehow, it even seemed as if she was enraptured in herself–like a narcissist.

Since I was the same way, more or less, that’s what I thought.

Speaking of which, even when she had ambushed me with arms crossed near the stairway, there seemed to be a touch of stage acting, almost theatricality about it.

For better or for worse, it lacked the unquestionable intensity of a real actor, but that coarse imitation gave rise to a different kind of intensity.

…But, well, after I've misread her so many times, I can't rely upon my own estimation–"How Much" wasn't a nickname I liked in the first place, but it was much too high of an evaluation of my half-baked appraisal ability.

Anyway, however it might look, this *was* the conversation I'd desperately desired.

A tete-a-tete between us two.

It was altogether different from what I'd expected, but it was a back-and-forth with Amiko Yurugase–let's continue the race.

We should be able to get over the language barrier with facial expressions and body language–however, I could see her back, but she couldn't see me at all. 'Look at me!' I wanted to shout.

'Whah…?' Amiko Yurugase turned around–telepathy? No, that's not it. I'd wanted to shout something, and somehow, it looked like I'd ended up shouting it.

Impulsively.

Damn, my self-control is faltering–I'm unable to endure this stressful situation, and things have stopped making sense. It's like I'm losing control over myself.

At worst, if she gets violent, I might be able avoid getting in trouble if I'm purely the victim, but if I end up as the aggressor, to say nothing of the possibility of us both getting caught fighting, I would get expelled, no joke. If things went badly, it might even be a matter for the police, as they say…

But, you can't take back words once they've left your mouth, and on account of Amiko Yurugase's relentless staring, it was even more difficult to apologize. Because instead of saying 'I apologize,' I said, 'I apolallies.' Well, I maybe I was trying to get through this by becoming allies with her; no, I don't know what I was trying to do. Sure enough, Amiko Yurugase said, 'Hauh…?' and made a deliberately puzzled face–moving closer, it appeared all the more menacing.[14]

Even this looks like bit like acting.

If she's trying to "perform" to encourage herself, she's putting a little too much effort into the performance–it's so theatrical.

I'm in no position to talk about other people, though.

I can't even say, "I'm sorry."

'Talkin to me right away on ya fehst day,' Amiko Yurugase got right to the point. Her face was so close I could feel the air exhaled when she spoke. 'How am I suppozed to take that?–ah you makin fun of me?' As I thought, if I looked at her face directly, I could provide some degree of translation for that quarrelsome manner of speaking. Facial expressions are important–eyes are windows to soul. My own eyes looked too dead to be windows to the soul, but it worked for what Amiko Yurugase was trying to say–though, having said that, I

understood her this time.[15]

I was making fun of her?

If I were pressed for an answer to that, well, although it was involuntary, I suppose I might have been making fun of her–rather than involuntary, it might be more accurate to say 'subconsciously'; or rather, it might be closer to the cruel truth of the matter to say that I just wasn't mindful of how I was acting.

I had vividly imagined that even as a transfer student unaccustomed to the area, it would easy to deal with a student who seemed isolated in their class, that I could compromise with her from an upper position, that I could extend a hand.

Rebuked for such a despicable pan, I succumbed to a dreadful level of shame. For me, that kind of shame can easily lead directly into rage–I want to rebut, 'Do you even have a heart?' for relentlessly torturing a wretched, pitiful person like me.

Such a pathetic mind.

Since I understood that about myself (I do understand it!), I devoted my entire being, mobilizing all of all the parts of my body to somehow remain silent–almost like I was weathering the storm by ignoring Amiko Yurugase's overpowering words.

Even if it turns out that she takes offense to being ignored, it's quite ironic that this time I'm the one ignoring her.

But what I need right now is mindful self-restraint.

No, with my type of mind, should I call it mindless self-restraint?

Well, since it would be awkward to be completely silent, I threw in some noises of acknowledgment every so often, but in my heart, I was thinking, "I hope this is over soon"–I was very reluctant to say any words of apology, but I couldn't even put on a remorseful facial expression.

'I get it, so please let me go home.'

That's what I was brazenly implying (despite the fact I didn't 'get it' at all), however, while I was getting more and more fed up, the wind's direction seemed to change–since I was desperately trying to suppress my overflowing self-consciousness, and I was letting Amiko Yurugase's words essentially go through one ear and out the other, it was a mystery as to just where the conversation had flowed. Now she was explaining to me how the current leader of the class was a girl called Suzubayashi, and how Kyakufuji was a nice girl who'd probably be kind to me, and how most things would go well if I made a boy called Hashimura my ally.

Even after realizing that, I felt like I couldn't understand what she was saying at all, but somehow it felt as though Amiko Yurugase was giving me a lecture about everyone in the class.

She was giving me a detailed explanation of things like the class hierarchy, how interpersonal relationships were organized, and the network of the class ecosystem. Who was in which situation, who had what personality, which established groups held influence, and finally, who was going out with whom, who were ex-boyfriends and ex-girlfriends… In her rough tone, Amiko Yurugase was giving me a careful and thorough explanation of all sorts of particulars I honestly didn't want to know.

And yet, if they're disclosed to me all at once, I couldn't really get a handle on the profiles of all 40 classmates–I wasn't even certain about everyone's names yet. I could barely remember which students had unusual names, or which students had the same names as friends of mine from long ago.

This was surely an instance of communication failure, but once I set aside the issue of my lack of understanding, isn't this almost as though I'm having Amiko Yurugase give me advice as a transfer student?–no, that's exactly what it was.

If I listened closely to what she was saying, and wrote it all down in a memo, it would seem to be quite a bit of information that would help me survive the next month. More than that; if I were a person who was skilled in the ways of the world and I'd met a girl I could naturally get alone with, this was personal information I couldn't have figured out in just one month–and I wouldn't even want to figure out scandalous details like who was intimate with whom in the first place.

But, being aware of that, the reason I can't really bring myself to take a memopad out of my bag is that I'm still quite uneasy about why Amiko Yurugase was giving me all of this information–this should be a one-sided denunciation of my impetuous foolishness as a transfer student, but why in the world was I receiving such charity?

Contrary to what her rude behavior would suggest, maybe Amiko Yurugase was actually a nice, helpful person, overflowing with human kindness–though I'm not the kind of docile person who would accept something like that. I don't recognize the existence of people who are "actually nice".

Rather, it was truly more natural for me to believe that Amiko Yurugase was trying to push a nuisance like me onto some other classmate.

I could readily accept that while Amiko Yurugase's lecture felt caring, the underside was that she just saw dealing with a transfer student as bothersome.

It was like she was saying, "Get away from me," but was indicating my destination, and on top of handing me a road map, she had given me detailed navigation instructions; so, well, thinking about

it normally, I ought to treat this as a conclusion to the whole affair.

A conclusion, and a turning point.

I ought to show my gratitude and say thank you to Amiko Yurugase, return to the class, and start talking to people like So-and-so Suzubayashi, Whoever Kyakufuji, and What's-it Hashimura-kun–we'd spent a very long time here, but maybe at least one person was remaining in the classroom.

I'd bungled up the order of my shirt buttons, but now was the time to press the reset button, as it were–it's a chance to start over.[16] *Ufufu, whom shall I befriend tomorrow, I wonder?*

Sodachi Oikura, the woman who could never think like that.

I can't make the right choices, and if my reasoning is sound, I start doubting myself even more–I know a troublesome transfer student like me will just get pushed onto somebody else.

If I were in their position, I'd probably do the same. You think I could treat every stranger kindly when I can barely do the same for myself?–I know how painful that feeling is. After all, high school third years are busy with studying for entrance examinations.

But even though I said "if I were in their position, I'd do the same," I must say it would be quite dubious as to whether I could actually do something like that.

Why? Because I'd have no clue who I should push the transfer student onto–as a girl of the lowest rank of humanity, I'd have absolutely no idea what kind of personalities my classmates had.

If I had known that, even a little, I wouldn't have held that classroom trial–and as a result, I wouldn't have been exiled so miserably, and I wouldn't have drifted all the way here to Shishikurasaki High School.

So, if this was the point of conclusion, then that was the point of doubt.

Why did Amiko Yurugase have such a detailed grasp of the class's personal information? Why did her knowledge reach even the most meager things, like everyone's idiosynrasies, power relationships, and interests?

I could only see it as strange.

Rather than call it strange, I'd have to say it was questionable–as a transfer student, I probably can't say there's anything odd about her knowing things about her classmates, but that's not the point I find dubious.

If she's carrying that kind of valuable information around, then shouldn't she be able to execute a plan by herself? That's what I was thinking.

Even with just that detailed of a map of influence within the class, she shouldn't be isolated–the biggest factor in my very own

isolation was my ignorance of and indifference to other people. In other words, if you're interested in other people, and you know things about other people, you can't really be isolated–even if you wanted to be. Even if, like me, your ideas about other people were simply prejudicial notions, it's be hard to believe that you could talk about the personalities of nearby people if you were in a state of estrangement and isolation.

On the other hand, it was also hard to believe that Amiko Yurugase had made up a bunch of lies on the spot. Although it's valid as an explanation of the situation, it's not very realistic to imagine that she had recited that much false information in order to drive me away.

I felt that the fabrication prowess needed to come up with so many lies that resembled the truth like that was just too high–to forge 40 pieces of personal information, no matter how you look at it, was a just little too eccentric to be believed.

It's something a special person would do.

I'd need to verify just how accurate all of that information was, but I couldn't believe that all of it was made up–*Shut up, Oikura, just what are you thinking about, what are you stewing about in that whiny little dim-witted head of yours; whatever you're thinking about is bound to be wrong anyway, so just obediently receive this blessing, idiot,* I seemed to hear Araragi's voice saying.

…I know Araragi's isn't saying that.

It's just that whenever I need a dissenting opinion to make me think carefully, I can only have it voiced by the Araragi inside of me–opposing Araragi is the energy that moves me.

Amiko Yurugase was shouting at me from a short distance away, but the voice of Araragi in my fantasy echoed stronger within me, full of intense discomfort, full of deep, acrid pain.

Whatever kind of stressful situation I find myself in, sending my mental image of Araragi flying with a punch clears my head to a certain extent–and the pressure I was feeling from Amiko Yurugase was nothing too significant.

That said, it's not like the Araragi inside of me will help me out of this dilemma. Well, it doesn't seem like Amiko Yurugase is going to get violent with me, so the situation right now isn't the worst it could be, but…

Even so, I couldn't sweep away my suspicions about just what she was planning to do. Just like how I see everyone as an enemy, everyone sees me as an enemy, and they're planning to hurt me if they get a chance… that's going beyond misanthropy onto the level of megalomania (would tricking someone like me yield a benefit for anyone?), but even so, this just doesn't sit right with me.

Just looking at the outcome, thanks to Amiko Yurugase, I could grasp aspects of the classmates to my right and my left whom I hadn't known anything about before, to a certain extent… however, after listening thoroughly to her machine-gun talk, in the end, I couldn't say any words of gratitude.

I didn't contrarily press her with something like, 'What are you trying to do, are you making fun of me?', but I was likely honest with what I said–my mentality that had instantaneously felt opposition to her self-assertive good will might have calmed down just from catching sight of a point of doubt.

A point of doubt.

If I laid it out it simply, it was something like, 'Why don't you use that information to help your current state of isolation.' However, she didn't seem happy with my lack of gratitude; I was threatened with a, 'What's with that look.' Certainly, I hadn't given her so much as a good reaction, but I'm bothered by that complaint about my facial expression. This is the same face I've always had. Direct the complaints to my parents, please–though, I don't have parents anymore.

Like she had given up on ungrateful, rebellious me, at long last, Amiko Yurugase looked away from me. Since our cheeks had almost come close enough to be on the verge of touching, I honestly felt relieved.

My personal space was "a distance where arms and legs can't reach me", so even though we'd separated to a small extent, my interpersonal stress hadn't completely disappeared–since I feel pressure whenever I face someone, frankly speaking, it would have helped tremendously if I could have kept looking at her back like earlier.

I can't really say that (even if it weren't me, there's no way anyone could say something like, "Talk with your back to me, please,"), however, at least Amiko Yurugase had heard half of my request.

Was it telepathy again (or rather, had I flared up and accidentally said it out loud again)? But although I had gotten flustered, that's not what it was–having said everything she wanted to say, it seemed that Amiko Yurugase intended to turn back, leave me on the roof, and go home.

No no no, wait up, does she mean to end it in such an incomplete fashion? I tried to detain her, but on the spur of the moment, I couldn't think of how to address her (Yurugase-san? Would using 'san' make her feel self-conscious? Would Yurugase-chan seem overly friendly? Should I not use honorifics? Would that be overly friendly in itself? Moreover, in my mental state, would I end up

flubbing an unfamiliar name? Was her name even Amiko Yurugase in the first place? Jumble jumble jumble jumble), so I had no choice but to resign myself to watching her leave in silence.

Ugh, such a helpless feeling.

I'd been told everything I wanted to hear, and she said everything she wanted to say; I certainly might have had good opportunities, but I couldn't say anything I wanted to say, and couldn't help but feel indigested, like I failed to achieve a good result–I ended up embracing the gloom.

It had quite won me over, in a rough, overbearing manner.

However, originally, I'm not sure I really had anything I wanted to say–the reason I'd been so particular about Amiko Yurugase was because she had ignored me.

And it made me angry.

I hadn't wanted to recognize my own bad decision to talk to her first; I was just obstinately coming to grips with the death of my expectations–I couldn't say I had anything like a sense of purpose. If anything, what I had wasn't a sense of purpose, but a sense of being victimized.

I can't forgive her for ignoring me when I was toughening up and trying my best–I could say that Amiko Yurugase just couldn't put up with my brand of selfishness.

She didn't eat lunch together with me, and she didn't even give me a tour of the school, but to make up for it, she'd given me this information–this is a harsh way of saying it, but no matter what the circumstances were, now that it's come to this, I could say she's served her purpose.

…It really is a harsh way of saying it, isn't it.

But, that's not what I'm saying, that's what the person herself is saying–since she knew she'd been given the role of stepping stone, she would probably warn me not to get involved with her any further.

I won't say I hadn't really intended to use her as a stepping stone–the unshakeable truth was that I'd started talking to her as my first step, or perhaps as a bridge, for me to blend into the class.

However, even if it had gone according to plan and I'd started fitting in in the class, and I could say I had no intention of casting Amiko Yurugase aside, it'd be hard to believe–or I should say, if I were her, since I have a strong persecution complex, I would definitely interpret it that way.

'You just talked to me because you wanted me to introduce our classmates, right?' and–'Yes, yes, so this is fine,' I'd reply.

'It's not like you had any interest in me, right?'

My shoulders fell, and I let out a big sigh.

Just like that, I could no longer support the weight of my body;

I crouched down on the artificial grass, and buried my face in my knees–my arms clasped around my legs. The skirt of my brand-new uniform will probably get dirty, but I didn't care.

I wonder, hm…, for instance if, here…, if there was a tightly packed plastic bag of food waste…, it's translucent, so you can see about 70 liters of garbage inside…, and Sodachi Oikura-chan, alias 'me,' was standing next to it…, if you asked anyone, "Hmm, which one should I talk to?", really, really, really, I'm such a hopeless lowlife that they wouldn't hesitate to choose the garbage bag.

In that situation, choosing me would be unnatural unless you were at least as much of an eccentric as Araragi–but, while that may be true, the only one who truly cannot forsake me, is me.

If I were anyone else, I'd be the first thing they'd cast away, but I am me–what would I do if I didn't protect myself?

No matter what they say to me, I won't lose heart.

I'd just crouched down, but I stood up right away–let's change the subject. I'll at least consider everything settled with Amiko Yurugase.

Aah, I'm not half bad!

It turned out all right!

I minimized the amount of interaction I'd had to have with Amiko Yurugase, who, while not quite as much as me, seemed to have a considerably troublesome personality. Rather, couldn't you call that doing well as a transfer student? Isn't this what they call taking a loss to earn a profit?[17]

Even if I earned a profit, I felt like I hadn't earned it virtuously,[18] but if I thought about this as letting Amiko Yurugase get away without getting involved with a dishonorable person like me, I could even feel like I'd done a good thing.

Why, haven't we both just done good things for each other? Ufufu, it feels good to do something good–somehow or other, in a way I couldn't have imagined, that rallied my spirits, and I rallied my body.

As I thought, my skirt was wrinkled, but compared to the wrinkles etched into my forehead, that was an insignificant matter–I've grown accustomed to it, I think.

Now then, it's gotten quite late, but I ought to make use of this information I've obtained; before I leave the school, why don't I return to the classroom for a little while…, perhaps I can chat my way into a friendly group.

If anyone's staying behind, they're exam students, and they're not just chatting, they're probably having a study group… 'Study group' is a sequence of words that horrifies me almost as much as 'Koyomi Araragi', but even if that's the case, I'll endure it with an

effort, I'll hold back my goosebumps, and I'll participate, enough to show them how magnanimous I am.

Studying is my specialty. Moreso than people.

Although it was too late, as I descended the stairway, I hit upon a thought: Amiko Yurugase went so far as to sell out her classmates' personal information in order to reject me, wasn't it because she felt the same way as I did?–though it's surely too late for that now.

I couldn't understand her very well due to the accent, but it seemed she'd said things like, "Even though I was avoiding people," and "Do you want to get dragged into this?" at the beginning of our talk.

For me, it wasn't an excessive excuse, but in her case, she might have been thinking with kindness in her heart, "I ought not to get involved with a troublesome person like me," and had therefore ignored me.

It's not necessarily out of the question.

Having said that, there are many times I've been isolated in my life, but it's not as if I've never rejected other people for reasons like that–if isolation is thinking that being by yourself is adequate, then it's natural to reject other people entirely. Ending friendships for the sake of your friends. Is there something bad about having that kind of dramatic event in my life?

So even if Amiko Yurugase had shown me the way for my sake, so that I wouldn't get dragged into her own isolation, there's nothing wrong with that either–it was a sequence of campus drama that was easy to see, that the transfer student, not knowing much about the class, would end up inadvertently affiliating with a very bad group, and afterward would find it difficult to lead a proper youth.

Being isolated is being fine by yourself.

Well, that's still intoxication, but… looking back on my life, I think I *can* get drunk on just solitude; however, *I'm not askin' you to try to sound cool, I know, I know, do what you want to protect your pride,* I wouldn't go so far as to think that.

If that's the case, I'd suddenly start worrying about her reasons for isolation–though, well, I suppose that's a lie. Since I'm garbage even below the level of food waste, I can't worry about the circumstances of other people.

I arrived in front of the classroom after walking down the corridor, and that rumination vanished like mist. No matter how serious Amiko Yurugase's mysterious situation seemed to be, my own silly and trivial concerns were much more important, much more urgent, and exceedingly more precious to me.

Of course, for an egoistical girl like me, it's not like I'm

expecting it to be smooth sailing from here on; even though I gathered my courage and opened the door, there was nobody in the classroom. It was as if I could hear an “emptiness” sound effect.

I felt like my resolve to participate in a study group was just a convenient, shameful delusion, and I was about to fall onto my knees once again, but I resisted–if I fell on my knees in a place that wasn’t astroturf, my kneecaps might break.

But I received unexpected damage from this admittedly pre-ordained strikeout, and I didn’t feel like leaving right away; just like that, I entered the classroom–I didn’t head for my assigned seat, but went instead toward the teacher’s desk.

It might have looked like I was thinking that even someone like me could make a proper self-introduction in an empty classroom, but now that I’m standing here, as soon as I saw the empty classroom, I realized how foolish this was. Trying to redo my self-introduction after school in an uninhabited classroom was not sane behavior–I’m glad I came to my senses before doing something like that.

I don’t think there’s any meaning in revising my self-introduction. It’d be better to prepare for tomorrow’s lessons–it’s just that looking out from where I was standing, where I’d made my self-introduction that morning, I thought I’d finally be able to take in the scenery of the classroom into which I’d transferred.

Since no one was there, it was natural that I would be able to see every little corner of the room, but just like before, I felt nervous, and realized I couldn’t really see anything–I couldn’t see anything but Amiko Yurugase, and I couldn’t think about anything but that girl. The rest was me despising Araragi. Hate Araragi hate Araragi hate Araragi.

That narrow outlook is not normal.

No, it’s not my outlook that’s narrow, but the capacity of my mind–even when I’m dealing with a great number of people, I can’t face them at all. How dare I somehow serve as a class representative at Naoetsu High School with that mentality. There’s a world of difference between me and Tsubasa Hanekawa.

With such narrow-mindedness, and such a myopic way of seeing things, I’m someone who can’t stand above people no matter what. Even if I stood below people, I’d bring at least as much trouble to the people standing above me–I’d even hesitate to stand upwind of people, let alone above them.

What’s the right way for someone like me to keep on living? I can’t imagine there’s a correct route, and even if there were, I probably couldn’t follow it anyway–but there really shouldn’t be anything like that for someone like me.

I wonder how everyone else does it.

Making the same failures over and over, knowing the right thing to do but being unable to do it, always having the same problems, just how would they keep on living?–well, by making the same failures over and over, knowing the right thing to do but being unable to do it, and always having the same problems, I suppose.

It definitely seems hard to get along with such people.

I couldn't be bothered to let out a shout–now, no matter what classroom I'm in, even if it's an empty classroom after school, for a girl immersed in thought by herself, I can spare no words.

What, am I pretending to live out my youth here?

Well, that's enough of that, I'll go home and study.

I'll lie to the Hakobe couple and say I'm feeling good and having fun at this school–if I can just execute that mission, I can treat this day today as a success. If I indulge in some self-injurious behavior and spoil myself with a loose self-evaluation, I should be able to relax just a little.

I'll try my best tomorrow.

I didn't have the right state of mind today. Today was my fault.

Tomorrow will also be my fault, but trying my best is no crime–as I was telling myself that, when I went to leave the classroom, I suddenly noticed something inconsequential.

Since it was inconsequential, it wasn't worth worrying about; but I'd realized it all by myself, so it seemed to me like the biggest discovery of the century. I was seized by a delusion that this discovery could change my life on a grand scale.

I'm not exactly a detective in a mystery novel, and it's highly unlikely that something like the Copernican revolution would happen based on just a single discovery, that the situation would take a 180 degree turn and instantly be resolved–it was inconsequential, an utterly trivial realization.

It's a non-issue, the number of desks.

I like math, and I have a habit of counting things–to elaborate (though, I'm sure you wouldn't want to know many details about me), when I see things that are lined up systematically, I end up wanting to count them.

Counting the number of columns and the number of rows, I produce the total number by multiplying–well, this is just me failing to cast away a childish habit, but compared with how bad my personality is, I can't really call it much of a bad habit.

So, somehow, I subconsciously had counted all the desks lined up in the classroom–but for some reason, the total number of desks didn't match up with the total number of students in the class.

Hmm?

Well, is that alright then?

Because I'd just transferred, of course the numbers wouldn't match–no, even so, that's not it. There were originally 41 people in the class, a prime number, when I'd nonchalantly transferred; in other words, I'd been under the impression that the current total population of the class was 42 people, but, if I took the 7 columns, multiplied it by the 6 rows, and added the remaining 1, I'd get 43 desks…, a prime number.

Well, it doesn't matter whether it's a prime number now.

That's not it…, since there weren't really any classes at Naoetsu High School with more than 40 people, it didn't come to me intuitively, but what does it mean for there to be a 43rd desk in a class that purportedly has 42 people in total?

…I had a bit of a bad feeling about this; however, it was a dull sense of discomfort. There's no doubt a special person like Tsubasa Hanekawa would have hit upon an even greater, unforeseen discovery in this ordinary classroom at this ordinary school; but it appears that all someone like me, who isn't even good enough to be called ordinary, can do is to be picky about this sort of thing.

Nevertheless, tilting my head in doubt, I thought I might have counted incorrectly, or was misunderstanding something, so I repeated the calculation several times. While I was doing that, I realized there was a seating chart taped down on the teacher's desk with cellophane tape.

Aah, so there was something like that.

Well, that was for the teacher; setting aside taking attendance during homeroom, the teacher wouldn't be able to remember every single one of the students' names in the middle of teaching a lesson from their curricula–moreover, since the class exceeded 40 people, there was all the more reason to have something like this. It was a big number of students, given the declining birth rates nowadays, but more than that, it was a class size that made me think the number of teachers might be diminishing–without something like this, it's unlikely the teacher would be able to call on particular students during class.

Looking at it, even though I'd just transferred, my name "Oikura" was written on the seating chart–did they really make a brand new chart because of me? Strange; seeing my name on the list like this, even someone like me seems like just another member of the class.

Anyway, when I compared the seating chart with the desks that had been lined up in the classroom, I hit upon the reason for my bad feeling–well, calling it a reason would be an exaggeration, since it was a rather trifling issue in the first place.

Put simply, there was one student absent from class today–I hadn't realized, because I was nervous when I made my self-introduction, and after that I hadn't been able to think about anything but Amiko Yurugase, but originally, there were 42 students in this class.

I was the 43rd student.

My doubts quickly melted away, but now that I've figured that out, I wanted to be certain about the details–who was the absent person?

It was tough to distinguish between boys and girls based on just the surnames written on the seating chart, but now I had all of my classmates' personal information given to me by Amiko Yurugase–if I reinforced my indistinct memory with those clues, I should be able to narrow down where the empty seat was to some extent.

Feeling like I wanted to know who was absent wasn't due to some kind of spirit of enquiry. Why, then? Because whoever was absent hadn't witnessed all of my failures as a transfer student today.

Flubbing my self-introduction, and being continuously ignored by Amiko Yurugase, wouldn't directly contribute to a bad first impression of me–so, thinking I could take advantage of their ignorance and become friends, it almost seemed like I was planning a con.

I'm still utterly sick and tired of trying to put on airs about my own superficiality up to now, but anyway, I identified the name of the absentee.

Indeed, even further than narrowing it down, I was able to identify the very person.

Combining my memories with the information from Amiko Yurugase, and eliminating names on the seating chart I could match to faces, only one seat remained–the specific name I arrived at by that process of elimination was "Hatamoto".

But that surname was all I knew.

I didn't even know if they were a boy or a girl–why? Because Amiko Yurugase had not given me a single bit of information about a student called "Hatamoto".

…Far from having suddenly resolved the affair, contrarily, I had absolutely no idea what was going on, and I started getting nervous that these assorted mysteries had started linking up and multiplying.

It felt like I'd gone astray in an unfamiliar maze. Going about this casually, I certainly hadn't found the solution to this riddle.

Of course, it wasn't like Amiko Yurugase's information was uniformly distributed among all the students–there were people she knew a lot about, and there people she didn't. For instance, as a girl, it

was natural that Amiko Yurugase tended to have denser information about girls than boys, and as you might expect, she'd have more anecdotes involving flamboyant students and students who stood out. But at the time, I was agitated too, and while that doesn't really count, comparing the number of seats with the list of names, it became clear.

There was only one student whom Amiko Yurugase didn't touch upon at all–the student named "Hatamoto".

What did that mean?

That is, it probably didn't mean anything.

Or rather, it probably was inconsequential–after talking about so many people, I could understand that there might be a student about whom she lacked information.

But if it's only one person, just one single person, I can't help but say it's a little curious why she made absolutely no reference to them–it seemed to be on purpose, rather than a mistake.

Had Amiko Yurugase intentionally hidden the information on "Hatamoto" from me? Because she didn't want to tell me? Why? She didn't want to introduce "Hatamoto" to a troublesome person like me? But, well, if that was the case, surely there were other classmates she wouldn't want to introduce to me…

…I had an unpleasant premonition.

Or rather, I had an unpleasant feeling.

I had been scheming to make the absentee my next target because they wouldn't know about all of my massive failures today, but bearing in mind that I had no information about the absentee beyond their name, it felt like it would be better to withdraw now in order to avoid getting stuck even further into the maze.

Having a bad idea is worse than having no idea.[19]

It would only lead to more failure.

If this was like always, I'd ignore the premonition, steel myself and dash off, but I could acutely feel a dangerous sign that this seating chart will make me stumble forward when I ought to stop. Breaking into a run, as if I was trying to escape from that premonition, I left the classroom–but it was already far too late.

Chasing and chasing and chasing, unable to catch up; escaping and escaping and escaping, unable to get away–that's me, the human called Sodachi Oikura.

Despite leaving school bearing a mysterious sense of defeat, I might have gotten through the rest of the day just by being depressed in my room at the Hakobe house; however, even returning home without accident was not within my capabilities.

You can't even get yourself home from school? If that's the case I'd want to congratulate myself on just getting this far–however, it's my assertion that I am not the only one responsible for that misfortune. I do have something of a masochistic tendency, but my tendency to mercilessly blame others whenever I can is at least as strong. I'm garbage, after all.

While I was talking with Amiko Yurugase on the roof and wasting time alone in the classroom, it had gotten very dark out; but when I tried to leave through the school gate, I had an unexpected encounter.

It was a group of three girls.

According to the information from Amiko Yurugase, it was our leader-like classmate So-and-so Suzubayashi, and two others–the two others seemed to be her kouhai in a club. I didn't know which club it was, but since they were wearing jerseys, it had to be a sports club. They seemed to be returning from club activities–no matter what kind of club it was, since she was a third year, she should have retired a long time ago, but even after retiring those OBs frequently make appearances.[20]

It looked like they were about to go home together, but So-and-so Suzubayashi's kouhai seemed to be bothering her–no, no, surely they were idolizing her, in a state of mutual happiness.

I wonder what it feels like to be idolized by your kouhai… Suzubayashi… Ah, right, her full name was Lily Suzubayashi.

If I'd encountered her in the classroom just now, I might have mustered my courage and tried to start talking to her, but now the timing was completely off.

I could even say it was bad timing.

On account of my bad feelings about that seating chart, I was completely exhausted, and in this dejected state I didn't think I wanted to talk with anyone–if I could, I'd have wanted to pretend not to have noticed them and pass by.

Fortunately, since she appeared to be happily chatting away with her kouhai, tact would dictate that I shouldn't butt in; that'll work as an excuse–or at least, it should. But, just before she passed beneath the school gate, Lily Suzubayashi and her two kouhai stopped and turned toward me. Like they were blocking my way forward–even trapping me in. Ugh.

Looking at her expression, she seemed proud, somehow–ah, I see, she's going to give me a hard time.

Because I'm quarrelsome, or I should say, because there was a time when I'd snap aggressively at anyone and everyone (and I'd find it hard to say I've completely recovered), I somehow understood.

Giving me a hard time–I suppose that means today's final event is going to be this unexpected interaction with a classmate.

Interaction I didn't wish for, that there was no reason for me to want.

No, well, this was just a coincidence, even to Lily Suzubayashi, and she's just capitalizing on this coincidence–actually, it's just bad timing.

Gah, such a pain… I felt like I could understand how much of a bother I was being to Amiko Yurugase by following her around.

With a feeling of futility, I pretended to have forgotten something, and tried to turn back to the school building, but I was called out to with a, 'Wait, transfah,' and there was no escape to be had.

'Goin home late, en't ya. I wanna talk to ya about somethin.'

I wanted to say, 'I don't have anything to talk about,' and leave, but her two kouhai were blocking the way–it was a splendid combination, as if they had planned it in advance.

Even if I tried to force my way through, there's no way I could prevail against three opponents–to say nothing of the fact that these jersey-wearing girls seemed like they played sports.

I've made up my mind.

From now on, if I have any painful experiences, no matter how small, I'll head toward Naoetsu High School right away and punch Araragi. I'll let my anger out on him.

Just from imagining that, I calmed down a little–I even put on a thin smile.

That seemed to look creepy to the two kouhai (well, it was), and they appeared to falter in the face of my mysterious impropriety; but as expected of the leader-like Lily Suzubayashi, she could hardly be bothered to raise an eyebrow.

Leader, hm… Come to think of it, there was a time when I thought of myself that way… though that was a long, long time ago.

Perhaps I couldn't achieve peace of mind when socializing if I didn't consider myself in such a position–I wasn't able to associate with people on equal terms.

I knew that from the start, but I couldn't face it–following that line of thought, Lily Suzubayashi was quite unabashedly like a leader.

I didn't think that because of our current face-off, but rather because I felt a peculiar aura about her when I introduced myself that

morning–even if I hadn't been lectured by Amiko Yurugase, I'd have realized that Lily Suzubayashi was a student in a good position in the class.

And because of that, it seemed hard to make friends with her… But if this is how we're getting involved, I couldn't help feeling regretful that I hadn't approached her in class today.

Well, fine. That's over and done.

Say something mean to me instead, please. Make this a bad experience, please. If you do, I can go punch Araragi. Come on, give me a pretext. Give me as much of a hard time as you want–if you like, I'll give you an excuse.

So, thinking like that, I asked, 'What business might you have with me, Suzubayashi-chan?' with an excessive affect–the two kouhai giggled at my amusingly foreign manner of speaking. Or were they giggling because they'd already been chatting about the transfer student's day of failures during club activities (something like, 'So she was able to talk without stuttering this time')?

Although, Lily Suzubayashi herself didn't seem to like that provocative '-chan'; she didn't so much as smile. Was she trying to get me to slip up by not responding?

To conform with their senpai, the two kouhai stopped their flustered laughter–ordering the scene into an awkward silence.

Well, setting aside the question of whether she was somehow commanding the two kouhai, Lily Suzubayashi knew about how badly I'd done as a transfer student, so even if I put on airs now and try to sound good, that shouldn't matter.

She'd already evaluated me.

But if that's the case, then it's puzzling why she's going out of her way to give me a hard time now–was she trying to show off in front of her kouhai?

Getting involved by attacking garbage like me, I'd think her popularity would only go down… If she wanted to be respected, wouldn't it be better to show off in front of her kouhai by treating the failure of a transfer student nicely instead?

As usual, I was thinking selfishly; but as if she had understood me without being told, Lily Suzubayashi said something to the effect of, 'This is for your own sake, you know.'

I wasn't certain due to the mixed dialects, but I think she probably said something like that–I know I'm not experienced with it, but I think it's better to not be overly high-spirited, because after all, that's not the kind of class we're in.

High-spirited? Sodachi Oikura hasn't been high-spirited in at least two full years… or at least that's what it might look like.

Unexpectedly, I don't really know what my muddled self looks

like from the outside… To my classmates, even my failures might have only been seen as playing the fool… That in itself is still humiliating.

For me, every single second seems like a life-or-death situation, but it would be very upsetting if people just thought of it as joking around.

But, as much as I insist upon that now, there haven't been any adverse effects–on the contrary, if Lily Suzubayashi is going to teach me how to be well-mannered in our class, it would be prudent to put on a more appropriate expression, or rather, put on a despondent expression, stay quiet and listen closely.

But then again, I am the epitome of feeble-mindedness, so I don't know how long my self-control will last, let alone any notion of prudence… I want to finish this talk soon.

Let me go home.

But, contrary to my wish, proudly and fluently, kindly and in detail, Lily Suzubayashi started describing all sorts of things to me; how she didn't want there to be trouble with me, how it's alright if I stand out badly, and how people would quickly become friends with me if I just acted normally, since it was originally a good-natured class.

In a different place at a different time, I'd feel nothing but grateful for this advice, but all I want right now is to go home.

I'm just getting more and more confused… I've had Amiko Yurugase give me profiles of each of our classmates, and I've had Lily Suzubayashi teach me about how to survive in the class, but I feel like I can't simply be happy about either.

I don't really think I can put all of that information into practical use.

I can't help but think that.

It's the fault of my bad personality; if people are kind to me, I end up trying to read into their ulterior motives–my distrust of people even extends to my new legal guardians, the Hakobe couple; I can't quite throw away any doubts that they could be plotting something… So there's no way I could readily trust Amiko Yurugase and Lily Suzubayashi, whom I'd just met today.

Well, setting aside Amiko Yurugase, with Lily Suzubayashi it was harder to understand her plan, or rather to read between the lines–it didn't seem as though she was just trying to treat the transfer student nicely to look good in front of her kouhai.

She didn't like her.

It's not that she didn't like me, or my behavior–no, well, she probably didn't like me anyway–but somehow, the person she seemed to consider an enemy was Amiko Yurugase.

To put it simply, she seemed displeased that I was so fixated with Amiko Yurugase–I felt that in the nuance of her words.

'Rather than buttering up that kind of girl, it'd be more advantageous to go with us.' That's not exactly what she said, but it's the meaning I gathered.

If that's the case, then this isn't advice, it's a warning.

Somehow, it appeared as though Amiko Yurugase's isolation was more than just a product of my imagination–or was it that Lily Suzubayashi herself had taken the initiative to push her out?

I hadn't heard anything like that from Amiko Yurugase, but…, well, you generally wouldn't want to discuss the details of your own ostracism in your first meeting with a transfer student.

In any event, this class's faction rivalries and power struggles were quite beyond my control…, even if Amiko Yurugase and Lily Suzubayashi were enemies, even if they were opposing sides, that kind of territorial battle has nothing to do with me.

Or to say it more clearly, I didn't want to get involved.

I fancy myself a disinterested bystander–so what I ought to do here was take Lily Suzubayashi's advice with an 'uh-huh' and pretend from the bottom of my heart that I understood it.

I ought to pretend I was reflecting on my thoughtlessness, enough so that she could harbor no doubts–but you could say that this reaction was the same as the one I'd attempted (attempted, and failed) with Amiko Yurugase.

Thinking back on how I've behaved, I've been quite the opportunist; a fairweather friend, you might say, an underling with a horribly gray morality.

Really, I'm beyond help.

I want to express my heartfelt sympathies to everyone here for ending up in the same class as a hopeless person like me–so, finally, Lily Suzubayashi, from whom I'd never have thought to receive such compassion, said, "Is that alright?" Well, that was just my own high-handed interpretation of her dialect; what Lily Suzubayashi had actually said wasn't "Is that alright?"

It was actually, "Ya gaht it?"

'I gaht it,' I replied.

It was just that I'd inadvertently let the dialect infect me, but Lily Suzubayashi seemed to take it as me screwing around with her, and glared at me.

Being glared at, I reflexively ended up glaring back–that's weird, by all accounts I should want to get along with everyone, but how did this end up happening? I suppose it's because I don't really want to get along.

However, while you could say it was because she was in front

of her kouhai, Lily Suzubayashi seemed to regard this as the right time to end the conversation. Prompting the two behind her with words to the effect of, 'Sorry to have kept you waiting, now, let's go, shall we?', she didn't say so much as a 'goodbye' to me.

It was what's called 'not giving a damn'.

She'd hurt me with that meaningless action. To think that someone could be hurt like this from such a nonchalant movement… One of these days, I'd like to behave like that in front of Araragi.

I'll use this as a reference, or as something to learn from…, at least it's much better as a study material than something enumerated in a manual.

Was that the attitude of a class leader?–It doesn't seem like I could imitate it, and if I tried to, I'd probably end up not knowing why I tried to do something like that in the first place.

But if I let that go, what remains is something I was grateful for–the selfless advice I received from her. Somehow, despite the fact I couldn't do anything on my agenda, I'd procured all I could shrewdly procure from Amiko Yurugase and Lily Suzubayashi… Speaking in terms of loss and gain, of course it was a gain, but the fact of the matter was that none of it was due to my own hard work and effort, so I couldn't help feeling gloomy inside.

Even if you work with all your might, you can't affect anything in your life, I thought, as if fate itself was giving me a kind, gentle warning. Like, *look like you're in a good mood and run along the rails that have been set out for you*–if I were asked whether there was something bad about that, I'd have no answer I could give.

It turned out all right.

That had nothing to do with me failing or getting off the right track–all's well that ends well.

Well, there was just one thing left that I had to do.

Tomorrow, I had to pick sides between the apparently hostile Amiko Yurugase and Lily Suzubayashi.

Or was my decision already settled?

If it's between the girl generally accepted as isolated and the girl generally accepted as leader-like, then I wouldn't even need to compare and contrast–naturally, I ought to join up with the latter.

Even keeping in mind that because I ended up offending her at the last minute, she certainly didn't think I was very likable, since she had tried to win even me over to her side in order to preserve Amiko Yurugase's isolation, I couldn't very well show disapproval–if she's a leader, she would be able to make that level of political decision.

But let alone a political decision, I'd find any judgment of right and wrong suspicious–even if the right path is clear, for some reason I'm not able to choose it, even if it's a path I can tell intuitively is

wrong, for some reason I can't help but choose it.

I don't like to do as people tell me, so I end up in meaningless defiance; I resist doing the profitable thing just because it's "profitable"–I don't want to be thought of as someone easy to read, who just moves according to loss and gain and advantages and disadvantages.

I don't want to be made fun of as someone who's easy to read.

It's true that it's the temperament of a childish contrarian, but for me, who's continually visited by misfortune, it's what little self-defense policy I have.

If my actions could be predicted, it would prove lethal–well, but, if I try to become hard to read, I would just end up as a girl who's hard to get along with, and I wouldn't be able to protect myself.

Besides, if I unexpectedly tried to side with Amiko Yurugase, I might be even more likely to be rejected by her than by Lily Suzubayashi.

And at the end of it all, I'd be isolated.

It wouldn't become some kind of three-way standoff–at worst, there's even the possibility that Amiko Yurugase and Lily Suzubayashi would think, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend," and, both considering me a hostile adversary, would collude against me.

That's no joke.

I don't know why those two are hostile with each other, but I certainly don't know of any way to get them to reconcile–so after all, the conclusion is clear.

However, in my lifestyle, driving myself into dilemmas is almost like a pastime, so I don't think I'll know which choice I'll actually make until tomorrow.

Aah, I'm sick of this already.

I don't care whether tomorrow comes or not.

But since today has been considerably unpleasant, it'd just be the same–well then, it's fine if tomorrow comes, though I won't be able to give it a warm reception.

My second day as a transfer student.

I'd been groaning and thinking all night, and I'd even driven myself to the verge of feigning illness to try to stay home, but in the end there was no way I could play hooky in front of the virtuous Hakobe couple.

I'd somehow managed to lie to them that, 'School was fun; I think I'll be able to do well at that school,' but in the end I lost my nerve.

It might be that the virtuous Hakobe couple had pretended to be tricked by that transparent, childish lie, but even if that's true, to shut myself away on my second day as a transfer student, wouldn't that mean that I haven't grown at all from when I was enrolled in Naoetsu High School?

It's too late to try to change what anyone thinks of me, but I couldn't even endure imagining Araragi thinking, "She never changes, does she."

So, getting stubborn, I changed into my uniform and headed toward Shishikurasaki High School–maybe, when I arrive in the classroom, there's even a possibility that yesterday was all a dream (as if!).

Leaving matters to random chance.

My mental image of him notwithstanding, that seems like something the real Koyomi Araragi would do–I wonder how nice would it be to be able to act without thinking the way he does.

And being able to act even if I did think.

If that man weren't Koyomi Araragi, I'd want to learn from his example about how to live–at least for this one morning, I'll try to be that kind of person.

But even if I ought to be happy about this, or if I ought to be happy in the midst of misfortune, when I finally reached the classroom, I was still stuck in the dilemma between Amiko Yurugase and Lily Suzubayashi.

Come on, choose one of them! But, although I was pressed for an answer, I managed to get by without picking between those two wonderful alternatives–speaking of which, I'm grateful that someone like me somehow seems popular, but the reason a hateful person like me got by without being compelled to make that harsh choice was not that I'd managed to come up with a good idea in time. Whatever I try to do, whatever failures I try to make, none of it has any effect on my life–if I say so myself, it seems like my life is just someone else's problem.

In other words, it was because the circumstances changed.

I hadn't changed, the circumstances changed.

The circumstances, or rather I should say, the conditions of the dilemma–despite that, not knowing when to give up, I was pretending to take a tour around the interior of the school; but when I entered the classroom at the last minute before the bell, Lily Suzubayashi was there as expected, but Amiko Yurugase was not.

She was absent.

…Absent?

No no no no, must be a joke.

Didn't she seem so lively yesterday when I was trying to talk to her?

Pretending to be sick? Doing what I didn't do?

But why would Amiko Yurugase pretend to be sick?

Wouldn't it be better for me to stay home, after being pressed to make a choice between two quarrelsome classmates on my second day as a transfer student, than for Amiko Yurugase? Is she trying to escape from me, the obstinate student who kept approaching her?

I'd be shocked if that were true; though I wouldn't go so far as to say that we had settled our dispute on the roof after school yesterday, we should have reached a tentative agreement.

I can say this with certainty, but I hardly think Amiko Yurugase thinks I'm that much of a threat. Rather than not coming to class herself, I'm sure she'd have chosen a plan to drive me out of the class instead–but, well, even that hypothesis might be the result of my unpolished, unrefined mental image of her.

Whatever the case may be, one of the parties presented to me as an option had withdrawn before the time to make the choice had come–however much I can make a mess of things just by myself, however much I'm a girl with that kind of temperament, I won't choose nothing. I can't choose nothing.

I've had the ladder pulled out from under me one way or another many times, and many times I've kicked the ladder away myself, but even I can't climb a ladder that's been knocked down from the start–so now that it's come to this, I suppose I have no choice but to be affiliated with the Lily Suzubayashi faction. Or rather, strictly speaking, it's the faction of everyone except Amiko Yurugase.

While I was busy being bewildered by this unforeseen development, I took my seat, and, 'Mohnin, transfah. Quiet today, en't ya.' The voice was filled with sarcasm, but I could detect no hostility; as I thought, it belonged to Lily Suzubayashi.

Not knowing what to say, I returned her greeting with an ugly, forced smile that I came up with on the spot–and that's how my second day as the new me began.

After that, my second day turned out to be quite different in every way to my first day–to put it in simple terms, all of my classmates began "making a fuss" over the transfer student. That is, me.

At any rate, I could hardly believe it was happening, so I can't help but describe with double quotation marks, but they were evidently "making a fuss", like they were all trying to entertain me.

Everyone took turns coming over to my seat and asking about my previous school–since I'd rather die than talk about that, I used whatever lies came to mind at the time (they didn't make any sense whatsoever); but anyway, everybody was immensely curious about me.

All of them wanted to know more about Sodachi Oikura.

Because I feel an instinctive sense of denial when talking about myself, I felt quite uncomfortable, and I had to suppress the urge to run away with all my might; however, ordinarily, it would be one of the best developments a transfer student could conceivably hope for.

Both boys and girls argued over who would eat lunch with me–even in a hallucination I couldn't have imagined the scene that unfolded before me.

If I reported this experience to Araragi, far from believing me, he might even take me to get medically examined–though if I say so myself, I'm not entirely sure why it's started to seem like I have a duty to report the details of my new life to that man. Anyway, trying to swallow that thought, I almost felt like I had heartburn.

So, what is going on here?

Was all of my failure yesterday really a dream after all? No, the cynical tone of Lily Suzubayashi's greeting this morning could only indicate that what happened yesterday was cold, hard fact.

Though, after that, Lily Suzubayashi had treated me exceedingly kindly–she taught me about the peculiarities of our homeroom teacher and the teachers in charge of each subject, and ultimately, I ended up eating lunch today with her group.

It really did feel like the top group in the class hierarchy, and I felt more uncomfortable than usual, but to say that I didn't enjoy it would be today's biggest lie.

It's true that I'm prone to carelessness and isolation, and shut myself away, unable to cope with communal life, but I'm definitely not a girl who likes being alone.

Being alone is easier for me, but I don't like it.

I want to make friends, I want to be friends with everyone, but I just can't do it–so, not knowing the correct way to behave in this

situation, it was difficult to stop grinning like an idiot. It was like I was being surrounded by paparazzi.

I wanted someone to kick me from behind and ask, *You're bad at forcing a smile, so what are you grinning about?* My old self at Naoetsu High School would have gone mad with jealousy if she'd witnessed this new Sodachi Oikura.

Of course, even though I couldn't have imagined this upheaval, my powers of suspicion trump my powers of imagination, and I couldn't erase all of my doubts. Like, aren't they just playing with the newcomer by excessively fussing over me, bewildering me and laughing at my confusion behind my back… It was impossible for me not to bear those kinds of misgivings.

But by the end of school, I had no choice but to recognize how improbable it was for most of those doubts to hold any truth.

It might be more appropriate to think that malice could be involved if there were only one or two groups doing it, but's a bit hard to make the case that every single person had ill intentions–I thought that Lily Suzubayashi would try to win me over to her side completely while Amiko Yurugase was absent, but if she had the leadership skills to mobilize the entire class like this (or should I call them instigation skills?), then it shouldn't be a very big problem whether I fell into her camp or not. She'd be able to force me to surrender right away, without having to go about it in this roundabout way–if she was that much of a "special person", that is.

But everyone here, including Lily Suzubayashi, is one of those "normal kids" I've yearned after–that kind of madness wouldn't appear here.

That kind of madness doesn't happen.

So just how can I resolve this precipitating and overflowing situation in a reasonable way? How can I logically interpret this development, which I can only describe as being lost in a parallel world?

In my head, I understood that I ought to enjoy this without worrying about trivial details, but if I could really do that then I'd have no troubles.

I'm on the verge of saying that everyone was compassionately treating my failures yesterday like they were nothing–like they were all colluding to not bring them up. While I was pretending to take a tour of the school this morning, they might have all held a class meeting to discuss "how to treat Sodachi Oikura".

Did someone propose that, *She seems so pitiful, so let's all act modest and make friends with her…*?

…I'd intended to give a preposterous example, but somehow even that seemed possible. "She seems so pitiful" certainly feels like it

has a touch of reality to it.

Ah, right. My life and my way of thinking are both pitiful.

It wouldn't be strange for me to gather sympathy from my classmates–I can't hide my feelings of shame, but because of that I can still have a decent experience; there's some truth in that.

So, in order to minimize the time I spend putting these details in order, I'll interpret it like that. I ought to treat my failures yesterday like nothing too, and from today onward, I'll redo my new life.

A new life befitting a transfer student.

Since I can't expect to get pampered like this forever, I have to change my way of thinking, to make use of this bonus time to the maximum.

This is an unexpected chance to reset things.

If I don't utilize this situation, I'll stay pitiful my whole life–to that end, I ought to use it to adapt to this new class.

Even if I'm wrong, I shouldn't reject my classmates' visits–so, there's no time to spare thinking about the absent Amiko Yurugase.

Let alone the other absentee, Ayakari Hatamoto, who wasn't in school today either.

I'd thought that the chance the gods granted me was just one day, but this treatment continued the next day and even the day after– if I don't maintain a steady mind, I fear I may end up under the delusion that I'm receiving this warm welcome because I seem like a cute and good-natured girl.

Don't be foolish. It's just because I'm cute. I have a bad personality, and there's no way I give off a good impression. I don't even have any confidence in whether or not I'm cute, really. I think I have an unpleasant look in my eyes.

If I don't keep abasing myself like that, I'll get into high spirits and commit another failure–even here, it's likely that I'll keep repeating the same failures that I've made over and over again.

Honestly speaking, even if it had continued for just one day, I'd be liable to become completely absorbed into this comfortable lifestyle, but in any event, the day after the day after the day after that, it was Saturday.

In other words, it was a day off from school.

Naoetsu High School was a rigorous private school, so there was a half-day of lessons on Saturdays, but the public Shishikurasaki High School had an ordinary two-day weekend.

Because I'd shut myself away for so long, I'd thought that a two-day weekend was too much time off, but I suppose at least that much time is needed for an insecure girl like me to shake off my unsteady emotions and regain my composure.

I'd had a fleeting hope that maybe I'd still be popular among my classmates on the weekend, but nobody really invited me to do anything, and for a moment I wondered, "Why?"

Then I returned to my senses. My good-for-nothing senses.

Even if I hadn't, though, it would have been quite difficult to keep ignoring the fact that Amiko Yurugase had been absent for three days in a row, however much I tried to shake off those unsteady emotions.

It's true that I'd intended to completely reset myself, but to reset the existence of an individual person, to treat them as nothing, isn't that almost like a kind of witchcraft?

The fact that not a single person in the class would talk about Amiko Yurugase weighed on my mind–even if she's being isolated, isn't this taking it a bit too far?

I'd understand if she was ignored while she was here. I can't say I haven't experienced something similar myself.

However, she's still being ignored even when she isn't here… I think that's pretty different from simple discord, hostility, hatred and

such.

Indeed… it's as if she's a taboo.

Like something you mustn't bring up.

I'd been treated like a tumor that way as well, and that's probably the closest thing to it–but it's still hard to say that's correct.

And besides, it seemed like the class felt no guilt about what they were doing–not everyone, but that's what I could take from the majority.

I had a bad habit of thoroughly examining peoples' faces, but even if I'd surmised that the class's behavior had been unified, I could say that their intentions did not altogether match up.

As a result of all the different motives at work, everyone had started treating me kindly–it appears that they hadn't held anything like the classroom assembly that I'd imagined. I finally managed to reach that conclusion at noon on Sunday.

No one thinks I'm particularly important. Just like always. It's not even that they were being considerate of how pitiful I am.

That's probably just an excuse I came up with.

They likely had various aims, but the biggest one was to treat me nicely as an act of atonement.

Not to give me this kind of hospitality in Amiko Yurugase's place. It's not that; they're treating me nicely to reduce their feelings of guilt for ignoring Amiko Yurugase–yes, that's the nuance.

That's more like it.

That aspect seemed to be different with Lily Suzubayashi, who was so clearly antagonized with Amiko Yurugase, but I don't think there's any mistake that was the general feeling in the class. Though, regardless of conscious awareness, subconsciousness is a different question.

This isn't a suspicion of my particular type of lowlife; even allowing for some errors, it squarely hits the mark. I have unwavering confidence in that conclusion, like I've correctly proved a math problem.

…But if that's the case, then why should I care?

No matter what feelings those boys and girls are carrying in their hearts, as long as they're not being cruel and spiteful toward me, I ought to deem it acceptable.

If I don't want anyone to interfere with my own inner feelings, then I shouldn't be concerned with other peoples'–not to mention that I'll only be staying in this class for one short month.

At any rate, it's not like I have to find a lifetime friend with whom I can get along from among the members of this class–I'd be utterly satisfied if I can just pass the remaining days uneventfully. You could say my youth is overly gray, but well now, if it's me you're

talking about that's just how it goes.

So I'll start the new week without puzzling over it any more than I have, without taking any action whatsoever–pfft, ha ha, of course I can't do that.

I'm Sodachi Oikura. The woman who can snap at anyone.

The pitiful girl who can't help but do something.

If what I attain isn't the result of my own actions, even if I'm blessed, I refuse it. There might really be some true good will and sympathy and kindness among the classmates making a fuss over me–but I don't care.

I'll throw down the gauntlet. I'll turn this upside down. I believe that it's fine to be pampered, to be treated affectionately, but I'll betray that belief, and rebel.

I'll defy destiny.

Because this is not the happiness I want.

Resetting target.

I need to get information out of someone.

It would appear that this difficult operation requires prudence; but, at the same time, it was easy to get started–because of the personal information that I'd received from Amiko Yurugase.

I'm sure Amiko Yurugase hadn't at all envisioned me using it for something like this, and probably didn't want me to either, but it was just the way of the world for scattered personal information to be abused in unforeseen ways.

I have two candidates.

The girl who'd been evaluated as nice, Norika Kyakufuji, and the boy who'd been endorsed as reliable, Yuuhei Hashimura.

As for the others, such as the very loose-tongued Eritari Kiriki, and the weak-natured Bouto Odorima, they had made it through the first round of nominations, but students with good evaluations, moreso than students with low evaluations, are a weak point for a crooked person like me.

I do think I'm the worst of them all, but I can't allow a single mistake from now on–if I don't impose on people's good will, I can't find a way forward.

I seem apologetic, but I have no excuses for it–I'd just been thinking that I'd exhausted all of the garbage inside of me, but no, no, not yet, inside I'm still sinking forever into a bottomless swamp.

Just how bad is my personality, if I seem most alive when I'm plotting some invariably unsuccessful, sinister scheme? There's really something wrong with me.

If this is what it feels to be alive, I'd rather be dead–but, in any event, I've opted for "evil" over "good".

So, who should I aim for, between Norika Kyakufuji and Yuuhei Hashimura? They do seem like similar people, so based on that I don't know which way I should fall, and after all, I'd consider going after a girl or a boy equally.

Thinking about it simply, it'd seem like I ought to pick Norika Kyakufuji, as we're both girls; however, thinking about how Amiko Yurugase, Lily Suzubayashi, and even Ayakari Hatamoto, all of my 'key persons' were girls, I had a feeling that it would be better to balance out the gender distribution.

Things like, since we're both girls it'd be easier to talk, or that we'd understand each other better, didn't really apply in my case–fundamentally, I'm the type of girl that other girls tend to dislike.

I'm aware of that.

But even if I say that, I'm definitely not the type of girl that

boys tend to like; however, now, if that jumbled up, bizarre atmosphere in the classroom was concentrated on the girls' side, what I really wanted was to hear a boy's opinion on it.

Of course, it's not like the boys have nothing to do with it, and I'm not in search of some kind of objective opinion, but since I'm that kind of narrow-minded person, I wanted to acquire knowledge about this problem from a position far removed from its focus.

I'd thought it could be better to try to get information from both Norika Kyakufuji and Yuuhei Hashimura, but I rejected that decent, idealistic idea right away.

However good of an idea it was, if I can't execute it, I can only reject it–with my mentality, I'm at my limit just dealing with a single person.

Collect all the information I could from the all of the persons involved, lay out the mass of evidence and make a comprehensive decision–if I could act that shrewdly, so un-Oikura-like, then I certainly should forget everything from Naoetsu High School.

Unaided and alone, using the minimum amount of movement to spy behind the scenes, and on top of that, doing it speedily–in less than a day if possible–if I can't draw up the resolve, I'll probably lose my motivation.

Therefore, I'll narrow my target down to one person.

It's fine if there's just one victim.

I certainly won't solicit help from someone. It'd be decidedly better to have someone to help me in this situation, but even the thought of trying to get along with a helpful person made me shiver in apprehension.

Since it seems as though I'll regret either choice regardless, I'd even be fine with a coin flip deciding for me, rather than worrying and complaining this much; but it was never my intention to rely on luck here (look, I'm a real pain).

So, stubbornly thinking about it by myself, I stubbornly produced an answer by myself–at the end of my indecision, I determined Norika Kyakufuji as my target.

I chose the girl over the boy.

I know, reason dictates I ought to choose a boy here–I know, that would have helped me a lot in the future, and that if I approach Norika Kyakufuji, in the worst case I fear I might make enemies of all the girls in the class.

Why can't I make the right choice, even in the simple details of the groundwork part of the plan? That left me utterly in despair, but on the other hand, it's a hard fact that actually making the decision made me feel good.

I'd feel shy talking with a boy… and that's not me trying to

feign naivety. I've accumulated quite a personal history of intensely snapping at boys at the drop of a hat–and against my better judgment, there have even been times when, to the best of my ability, I've acted cute and appealed with femininity.

But essentially, I'm scared of boys. I don't really want to talk about it in detail, but what I'm afraid of is how large and how physically strong they can be.

In short, it's the same reason why I'm afraid of crowds.

I'm afraid of having violence wielded against me.

If I analyzed this seriously, I suppose it has something to do with my upbringing, but I wonder if girls generally have a similar kind of outlook on boys.

Ultimately, when negotiating with people who have the power to crush my opinion and attitude with violence, it's unavoidable that I get faint-hearted–or possibly, that I get excessively brash.

So if possible, I'd rather not face off one-on-one with a boy.

If I had to, in a situation beyond my control, I'd screw up my courage; however, since there was another choice available, by all means, I'll make that choice–I don't like getting hit.

The more I get hit, the more fed up with it I get.

Though, it's possible that I get hit anyway when trying to extract information from my classmates.

I say I won't use violence, but I'm quite a barbaric creature myself–even though I wouldn't call it peaceful, from here on I'm going to be disturbing a community that has attained a certain level of harmony.

Even if I were intending to make meringues, trying to impose on the kind-hearted Norika Kyakufuji's kind-heartedness–I'm sure that just from knowing the filth of a disgusting person like me, her virtuous future will be spoiled.

Whenever something bad happens, she'll remember me–I did have enough of a conscience to feel guilty about that, but it's too late for me to stop.

Early Monday morning, I lay in wait for Norika Kyakufuji near the entrance to the school building, and then I dragged her to the roof–"dragged" is a strong word, but actually, if the ruffian-like technique I used wasn't dragging, then I could only use words like "abduction" or "kidnapping" to describe it.

Good grief, I'll never be a champion of justice at this rate–I wonder how proper people would behave at a time like this. But then, the hard, undeniable truth of the matter was, by using this high-handed, wrong method, I'd succeeded in arranging a one-on-one with Norika Kyakufuji.

In her case, me jumping out at her in such a reckless fashion

surely seemed like a completely unexpected turn of events–well, it was.

If I were to evaluate myself, I'm guilty of quite a lot, and not a single thing has gone well in my new life as a transfer student, but I haven't fallen into hysterics, and I haven't hurt anyone physically–as much as I've demonstrated how low of a person I am, I can even say I've just barely managed to avoid being called dangerous.

She may have thought I was rather slow after I stuttered through my self-introduction, but there's no doubt she didn't expect me to do something so sharp as forcefully summoning a classmate like this.

Now that it's come to this, it's almost as if I'm under the illusion that I passed the previous week with the most effective behavior to prepare for today, including the fact that Amiko Yurugase taught me that this roof was a deserted place–even so, from Norika Kyakufuji's perspective, it was probably just sheer misfortune.

Well, I at least want to learn from her, how she answered a summons from a disaster like me with grace, kindness, virtue, good character, and even a little charm; I want to make use of that in my life from now on–at the very least, I may act somewhat violent toward you, but I swear that I will not wield violence against you.

I swear it to Araragi.

If, for instance, I'm unable to obtain the result I desire, and I lay even a single finger on Norika Kyakufuji, I swear I will kiss Araragi on the cheek. To me, that's an even more humiliating vow than promising to kiss the ground. Just from swearing it I'm starting to feel sick–from Norika Kyakufuji's view, she'd probably just say, 'Who even is that?'

Well, while she was looking bewildered with an, 'I don't get it,' the story I got out of her was the best I could hope for.

Luckily, my sudden show of animalism–not like a panther or a clever beast, rather, a horse perhaps–had shown my true character–,[21] Norika Kyakufuji was trembling with fear, just like a small animal, and there was no hint that she'd realized my bluff.

However, I didn't feel any sympathy for her cowering appearance, nor was I provoked to sadism, nor did I fly into a rage–but it was all I could do to keep my frustration from boiling over.

Ah, right. That's why.

If you're born into a good family, if you grow up eating well, this is how you turn out–I thought quietly. If you're treated kindly by your family and your friends, this is how you turn out.

Ah, unpleasant, isn't it.

After this, I suppose this girl won't furrow her brows again for her whole life–she won't raise her voice, grind her teeth, kick a wall.

Nice, that.

Since I'm fine by myself, I don't suppose that'll ever come to me, I guess.

If it's all I can do to just take care of myself, isn't is alright to be alone? No, no, each and every person goes through difficult times, but to the best they can, they endure and keep on living, I guess.

I suppose.

If I'm not the most wretched human there is, then surely I can't say that this world is a crueler place than hell, I guess.

Or, wasn't it?

Even my plan to make friends with this kind of peaceful girl, call each other by our first names, hang out together, study together… Right now, am I not trying to destroy it, to cover it all up in black?

If I am, that's fine. I'm only me, after all.

Norika Kyakufuji was unable to relax herself, and must be thinking, 'Why did this happen to me?' I got up close to her–just like Amiko Yurugase did to me on my first day as a transfer student.

Even though I say that, I think it must have had several times the impact as when Amiko Yurugase did it–the look in my eyes is extremely ugly. When I look in a mirror, it's bad enough to make me yell in astonishment.

Honestly, I was a little anxious about the possibility that she could start crying (if she cried here, I might become unable to endure anymore and fly off the handle); however, I suppose she knew it was obvious that crying would be of no help whatsoever in this situation, and further, Norika Kyakufuji didn't seem to be having that much of a hard time.

How should I put it… she was that kind of peaceful girl.

That did make me feel a bit relieved–but as I'd expected, she was different from the people at Naoetsu High School.

She was different from those "special people".

Rather than 'not having a hard time', she presented no resistance–it felt like I was pressing on hanging fabric.

I had no intention of laying a hand on her, but let alone crying, I'd thoroughly thought through the possibility that Norika Kyakufuji showed fierce reluctance to talk–however, piece by piece, even though it seemed hard to talk about, she began her story. It was far shorter than I could have expected.

As overbearing and coercive as I'd been, and as much as she didn't relax her pose while she was reluctantly speaking, there was a tinge of passion about Norika Kyakufuji's tone of voice, and her words even started to flow–I've already spent five days total in this foreign classroom, so it wasn't much trouble for me to understand the peculiar accent.

While that may be the case, even if this doesn't reduce the severity of my crime of calling her out here and cross-examining her so forcibly, the perspective of exceedingly peaceful Norika Kyakufuji was, that the state of the class recently was fairly stressful–therefore, on account of their guilty feelings, they were treating the transfer student overly kindly. It looked like my reading was right on.

You see that! It's just as I'd thought; there's just no way someone like me would receive that kind of welcome from an impartial crowd!

Though, this certainly isn't a triumphant occasion.

Even though I'd thought they were making me comfortable due to their guilty feelings, it's not even like I'd pressed Norika Kyakufuji for this testimony–in the contents of her story, there were points I'd anticipated, but also points that went above and beyond my expectations.

While I was listening, there were even parts of her story that I didn't want to hear about, and I quickly started to regret acting like such an amateur detective like this; just like I always do.

Ah, really.

Why am I doing this?

Surely Norika Kyakufuji didn't know why this was happening to her, but I felt the same way–why is this happening to me?

After school, I went to meet Amiko Yurugase.

Honestly speaking, I'd thought this would be the biggest obstacle–Amiko Yurugase has been absent from school all this time, and sure enough, she didn't show up on Monday either; so just how can I arrange to meet her?

I truly could not think of any way to do it.

As a transfer student, I didn't know the area, and I didn't have any contacts here–there was no way for me to discover Amiko Yurugase's address.

Long ago, I might have been able to consult the class registry or an address book and figure it out quickly, but these days regulating personal information was a top security concern for any organization–especially if it involved children.

Of course, just like the information on Ayakari Hatamoto, there was nothing on Amiko Yurugase herself in the information she'd given me on our classmates–besides, while she'd told me in detail about our classmates, she didn't at all touch upon any location information like who lived where.

I dare say she wasn't hiding it out of concern–since she'd gone into such detail about even male-female relationships, hiding addresses should be rather meaningless–I think what this meant was that even Amiko Yurugase didn't really know where our classmates lived.

Well, nowadays, communication between fellow students was mostly done with cell phones, and it might be thought fashionable to not know exact addresses–at present, the most important address to know wasn't someone's home address, but rather their email address.

In short, since I don't have a cell phone, I can't do anything about this situation–if that's how it is, I should have taken advantage of the Hakobe couple's good will and had them buy me a cell phone.

Well, even if I had gotten them to buy me one, it's hard to believe that I could have acquired Amiko Yurugase's contact information from another classmate…

By the way, as expected of our information society, my summoning Norika Kyakufuji to the roof had spread throughout the class in the blink of an eye, and my period of popularity sadly met its demise. It's not that Norika Kyakufuji told anyone (rather, it was more like she had gallantly stood up for me–perhaps it was fear of revenge, but it seemed like her virtuousness had melted some of the evil within me. What should I do if I actually start liking her?), but it appeared that my coercive manner of dragging her had been witnessed by someone. Even though I'd more or less made sure I was out of public

view…

A state of isolation, by myself.

I'm not going to show off and say something like, I'm not lonely, or, I'm not sad; however, being alone did allow me to calm down, and that was also one of my intentions.

Being alone and isolated, being insulted behind my back, I think that's more who I really am–mm, it does feel like I'm hitting my stride.

So, that problem is nothing to worry about.

After being dragged away from a position of popularity, I faced the pragmatic issue of how to endure being with my classmates from now on; but in the end, the issue of how to contact Amiko Yurugase was more important to me–though it was quite a hurdle itself.

But, I barely made it in time.

Before my wickedness became well-known in the class–in other words, before Norika Kyakufuji had been taken under the protection of her robust, strong friends, I successfully procured some unexpected information from her.

In the final stage of my rooftop interrogation, she'd told me that despite being absent from high school, Amiko Yurugase was going to cram school.

Somehow, it appeared that Amiko Yurugase and Norika Kyakufuji went to the same cram school, and the latter had noticed the former sitting in the self study room.

Really, huh.

Skipping school yet attending cram school was quite incoherent behavior–though that was just a value judgment from someone who doesn't really know about cram schools.

It might be obvious nowadays that it's more efficient to study at cram school than at high school. Maybe it's not all that unusual for an exam student to be okay with staying home from school, but to consider staying home from cram school altogether unthinkable. Since we're third years, in this semester you could generally eyeball the number of days you were in attendence…, there was a persuasiveness in viewing Amiko Yurugase's continued absenses as a result of such a calculation; she wasn't a thoughtless person like me.

However, cram school, hm…

I didn't have the need, nor the money, to attend one, but…, now that I think about it, a place where all you have to do is study, where there was no need to communicate with nearby members of my generation, it's quite ideal for me, and really seems like a comfortable space.

Isn't that just the best?

For Norika Kyakufuji's part, surely she was completely

ignorant of my intention to take action outside of school in this case, and had inadvertently revealed that information to me; however, for my part, it was priceless, precious information indeed.

Of course, no matter what, I had to start working to find out of the name of the cram school, but there was quite an exceptional difference between that and the work needed to find a home address–a cram school's location would be made available to the public as a matter of course.

If exam students enrolled at Shishikurasaki High School were attending this cram school, I should be able to narrow it down considerably–now that it's come to this, now that the curtain's been lowered on the period of being "fussed over" by my classmates, I could interpret this new period more positively, as a period of freedom that I could use to determine the specific cram school I'm looking for.

Even though it's no longer possible for me to gather information from my classmates, I could still ask teachers about cram schools in the region–after school, I all but determined the cram school that Amiko Yurugase was paying tuition to attend.

I can lose myself over the details, and in some respects I must enjoy that unproductive work–in the future, I'd like to pursue a job where I dig holes and fill them back up, or something like that.

But in the end, whether it was just an empty theory as useless as swimming on tatami mats, I headed toward my destination after school–but what surprised me was the scale of the cram school.

"Yuuge!" I ended up crying out.

This isn't a high school?

I can't believe it. I thought it might be a backdrop painting, spitefully created to make a fool out of me as a hillbilly from the countryside, but this was the right address, and I could see the signboard.

At any rate, I couldn't understand it, but as a result of loitering around the area, I somehow realized that its enormity was due to the fact that it also served as the administration building of the cram school's management organization; however, even so, it was still quite a large-scale cram school.

I give up. It's just… well, I made quite the miscalculation.

I'd thought that I could meet with Amiko Yurugase straight away if I'd visit the cram school, but I hadn't imagined the cram school was so large–of course, because it's so big, surely there's a proportionally large number of students here, isn't there a considerable degree of difficulty to finding just one single girl among them, who I'd only spoken to once, and, honestly speaking, I can't say I wholly remember her face?

She's probably in casual clothes, and she could have changed her hairstyle, so I can't use those terms to find her–and in the first place, I'm not 100% sure this was the cram school Amiko Yurugase was attending. Even if I refuse to give in, and the place I'd narrowed it down to was correct, there's no guarantee that she was present here today.

Thinking about that, just thinking about that, I felt a profound sense of futility, and I started to think I should just go home, but I barely managed to rouse myself–hey, it just depends on how you look at it, right?

Because there were so many people, it was easy to disappear into the crowd. If this were a more small-scale cram school, there'd be no helping the fact that an unknown high school girl would stand out–I thought, trying to enter the building, but as soon as I tried, the wind left my sails.

It felt like my feet were trapped.

At the entrance to the cram school, a hand baggage check was being performed–a metal detector gate had been installed, and to get inside, students were showing the contents of their bags and some kind of cram school identification to a security guard.

That's not all; they were placing cell phones and music players, manga, and even novels in transparent plastic bags and handing them over–there appeared to be a rule that anything unrelated to studying had to be deposited into lockers. It seemed they were only allowed to bring items like textbooks, reference books, notebooks, writing materials, dictionaries, and analogue watches–since there was a possibility that digital watches could be smart watches, they also seemed to have been banned.

Surely that was too strict.

At least, that's what I thought, as a hillbilly from the country–it took my breath away. Surely all they'd need is an x-ray body scanner, and this would just about be an airport.

Thinking that maybe there was a customs inspection further inside, I unconsciously stood on my toes trying to see–but if I behaved suspiciously like that, they might call security on me, so I quickly corrected my posture.

But I couldn't easily settle my feelings of astonishment.[22] It was quite a staggering feeling of coming into contact with a different culture–was there something in this building that they need to set up this much security for? I could only think that Arsène Lupin[23] had sent them advance notice, or something.

However, speaking of appropriate measures, this might in fact be appropriate…, even if there wasn't a treasure Lupin was aiming for inside, since parents worry themselves about their precious children

studying here, it was extremely important for the administration to turn away suspicious persons like me at the door. Precisely because they weren't some unwise school institution, which might be liable to run into issues of civil liberties, they were able to install this kind of gate here.

How goddamn proper.

If that's proper, what, are you people my enemies?

As I was feeling fiercely angry at those exam students, beloved by society, and with good future prospects, I thought there must be a rear entrance somewhere, and tried to find a different way in–I'd already gotten sick of the building's size and tried to go home, but if I'm presented with a clear obstacle, I end up wanting to overcome it.

I'd be happy if I could make use of this challenger spirit in a different form in my life. This would really be useful out in the world–I thought, wandering around the circumference of the building, once again searching for the location of a something like a staff entrance or a service entrance for materials; however, in the end, there was no need for that kind of loitering.

It's not that there wasn't another entryway, but rather, there was nothing I could do about the fact that the other doors had been tightly locked automatically; when I'd exhausted all of the options, I returned to the front entrance, and, huh? I realized something.

Huh? Or rather, hey!

The scene spread out before me was just like airport security, but I realized that the hand baggage check was quite unserious, or intentionally negligent, both on the part of the checker and the people being checked, and it appeared that it was being performed rather complicitly.

The security guard was letting students inside the cram school with just a glance at the interior of their bags and their school identification–even the rules about prohibited items somehow seemed completely informal.

Because there was a metal detector, they couldn't help but hand over electronic devices like cell phones and game consoles, but they could bring as much manga and stuff like that as they wanted.

The management system was rotten.

Deeply so.

No, surely there was no way the security guard was taking money under the table from the students. The reality was likely that, doing the same thing every day, they'd decided, "Suspicious people don't come here anyway, and if people won't study, nothing we can say will make them"–in the first place, it's likely the case that this exaggerated security was a way to appeal to the students' guardians, and the rules weren't actually applied very strictly.

It's a little… yeah, disappointing.

However thoroughly thought out a system might be, however well-constructed it might be, since you had to get people to execute it, there's no escaping human error–moreover, there's no escaping human carelessness.

Shirking off, and laziness.

Since my life so far has been crushed by those kinds of things, by not doing the right thing, I couldn't help but feel disappointed–but while it was regrettable, to me, this was an altogether pleasing conspiracy.

Such nice rot. It's like fermentation.

It seemed like you could get through that checkpoint-in-name-only even if you weren't a student at the cram school–even if you were a heinously suspicious person like me plotting to do something bad to a student like Amiko Yurugase–to me, who's managed to slip through so many safety nets, that metal detector gate looked almost like a welcome archway.

Ku ku ku.

Putting on a wretched smile befitting a piece of garbage, I stepped forward–now then, security guards, let's see you open those dull eyes suddenly just for me, and use both hands to stop me!

I passed through the gate full of tension, almost in desperation, but the three brawny male security guards performing the check did not suddenly awaken their sense of professionalism, and I almost didn't even seem to enter their field of vision, let alone pull the wool over their eyes–they'd probably look the other way even if I had a cudgel inside my bag.

Since I didn't have a cram school ID, I showed a high school ID in its place (I'd thought using an ID from Shishikurasaki High School would be pushing it a little, so I used the Naoetsu High School ID that I happened to still have); whether it coincidentally resembled the cram school ID, or whether the checkpoint was as dead as I'd thought, the security guard let me pass with a jovial, 'Go ahead, do your best with your studies.'

I know I shouldn't say this to an elder, but I couldn't help but think, why don't you do your best, you just let a suspicious person through–but well, surprisingly, this might be how criminals are born, I suppose.

It's a rather audacious idea for a guilty party to have, but if someone had properly stopped me earlier in the process, I'd have gotten by without resorting to trespassing–as I was thinking about just how many delinquent characters had snuck into the cram school using the same method as me, I hurriedly walked forward into the school.

Even bearing in mind the fact that the inspection was like a

sieve, since I hardly had any hand baggage, there was nothing for me to hand over, there was no need for me to approach the lockers–I'd successfully entered, but there were a lot of people, and I had no clues about how to find Amiko Yurugase's location.

I guess I'll have do a thorough search all around this extensive facility that I'd misread as a school…

Doing this kind of search operation myself wasn't enough to make me lose heart, but I can't say I had any useful ideas. All I can do is continuously execute bad ideas.

At a time like this, if I were a "special person" like Tsubasa Hanekawa or Hitagi Senjougahara, of course I'd be able to overcome this situation by myself, but even if I weren't, I could insist on a worthless thought like, if I lose my way, surely a passerby will suddenly appear to guide me to my destination…

These boys and girls all had means to get along in the world, through relationships, chance encounters, friends with similar interests and such–as a regular person with a bad personality, I had none of that.

If, for instance, Norika Kyakufuji, who appeared to attend this cram school, had appeared, she wouldn't say, "Come here, quick!" and take my hand to guide me–such a touching development wouldn't happen. Even if I relied on things like personal connections, communities, or interpersonal relationships, it's of no help now.

At home, at school, and at an unknown cram school, I'm alone.

Fine. I'll show them the power of being alone.

I'll resolve myself once again.

Thus, while fantasizing about meeting Norika Kyakufuji, I recalled one piece of effective information–indeed, she'd certainly said that she'd noticed Amiko Yurugase in the self study room.

I surely can't obsess over one detail and lose sight of the greater situation,[24] and if she said she was in the self study room at that time, that doesn't mean she's in the self study room at this time today–however, I could use this as a point of reference.

Thinking normally, I'd guess that she was in a classroom somewhere receiving a lesson from a cram school lecturer, but there's no way I could barge into a lesson if I retained my sanity…, for now, I'll pretend to be studying in the self study room and await an opportunity. It's not the very best way, but it doesn't seem like an altogether bad plan for me.

Simply put, I was curious about how it felt to study in a cram school, and I wanted to personally experience the atmosphere–so, confirming the location of the self study rooms using a guide map next to a stairway, I started moving.

Walking inside the building like this, the structure almost felt

more like a vocational school than a cram school–since I'd thought about pursuing that course myself when I'd left Naoetsu High School, that's the impression I had.

The checkpoint at the entrance was easy to fool, but there was a different group of security guards working inside the building, and I felt a little uneasy (I hadn't expected them to be working); and if it were obvious from the point of view of a cram school student that I was not only a stranger, but an intruder, I was seized upon by my negative imagination–but in the end, I wasn't detained by anyone, and I arrived at the self study room.

It felt a little like I was invisible.

I was avoiding being seen in order to do something bad, and now that I'm here, both my feelings of guilt and exaltation started to deflate with a hiss.

Rather, I started feeling like nobody had taken any notice of me. Like I was being ignored. It made me realize that it'd be the same thing whether I was here or not–I'd made my decision, I'd taken action, and I'd felt like I was on some kind of great adventure, but now I felt like I'd taken a cold shower. With water so cold I fear I might die from a heart attack.

Before, I'd selfishly thought that a place like this, where all you had to do was study, was where I belonged, but now that I've made my way here, it seemed boring–at this rate, even if I went on to college, there's no doubt I'd have to endure this same feeling.

I really do understand (I understand).

I'm too quick to give up on myself. I pretend to be brave, pure, and philosophical, to keep the damage I receive to a minimum–I recognize that it's because of that damage control method that my whole body is full of wounds and defects. I recognize that, but I can't help but continue. I understand that my way of life is counterproductive, but it's just so easy.

I thought a second time that I might as well go home, but I was on the verge of getting myself under control–well, I'd intended to await an opportunity in this self study room, but if I open the door and don't find Amiko Yurugase inside, I'll return home right away. I'll make a magnificent U-turn, enough to gather the eyes of every one of the cram school students.

I was on the brink of trying to attract people's attention by behaving eccentrically, and I suppose I was nearing my limit on how much tension I could handle, but I didn't quite have the self-awareness to realize that–really, if I open the door to the self study room and Amiko Yurugase isn't there, I'll spin right around like I'm performing ballet.

I might really get security called on me if I did that… but there

was no need for that kind of development.

In other words, she was there.

Amiko Yurugase was there.

And moreover, I could see her uniformed appearance sitting right next to the door–there was no way to avoid her wide-eyed stare as our eyes met, and both of us froze.

Somehow, there seems to be a trend of me starting to dislike and despise the very things I wish for, as soon as they come true–it's no wonder that no matter how long it's been, I can't cut off my connection with Araragi.

‘Wow, what a coincidence, I’m also going to be attending this cram school from now on! I’m so happy to have met you here, Yurugase-san! I’ve been so worried about you, being absent all this time. But I’m really glad you seem well!’ I went on and on with that kind of exaggerated lie, but I got absolutely no response–Amiko Yurugase scowled at me like I was some kind of man-eating demon, and with a few words to the friends she seemed to be studying with, she walked over to me with long strides, grabbed me by the scruff of my neck, and dragged me out of the self study room.

Despite that, I tried to repeat my jumbled up, disgraceful explanation, but Amiko Yurugase did not lend me her ears even a little. Now that it’s come to this, my discontent with her not believing my lie passed beyond my guilt over telling a lie–but since it was quite possible that she’d drop me in a chokehold if I showed much resistance, I let myself get hauled out of the room just like that.

Just what is happening? It’s as if I’ve finally hit the spotlight, and I’ve gathered the stares of all the cram school students who hadn’t cared a bit about me so far–I pretended it was no big deal with a wave of my hand, but from an outsider’s perspective there was no doubt it could only seem rather painful.

In that rather silly manner, I was taken all the way outside the cram school–I’d thought she would go back inside after throwing me out, but not so; it appeared that Amiko Yurugase intended to take me even further away.

I suppose this is how Norika Kyakufuji felt as I’d dragged her up to the roof with all my might–though, if that’s so, no matter how I look at it, this retribution has come much too quickly. For this to happen on the very same day, Norika Kyakufuji must be overly beloved by the gods.

Where are we going? Maybe she’s bringing me to a back alleyway or someplace like that, and she’ll really put me through the fire this time…[25] I hadn’t anticipated such a development at all in the first place, due to my own damned carelessness; however, the place where Amiko Yurugase finally let go of me was inside a 24-hour-service fast food restaurant.

This certainly seemed like a place that high school students use to chat with each other, though I hadn’t experienced that culture myself–while Amiko Yurugase ordered a drink at the counter, she sat me down, then sat next to me.

Next to each other at a table for four.

It somehow seemed like the seating arrangement of two very good friends, but this was just the second time I’d properly spoken to

her, and besides, the atmosphere was unprecedentedly, terribly serious.

It felt like my territory had been bluntly violated, and this really didn't sit well in my stomach; or rather, even now, I still haven't learned my lesson and simply can't forgive her–either one of those.

Well, someone she despised had suddenly visited her without an appointment, so it's unavoidable that she would get angry at my arrival–I hadn't managed to get my head around that kind of possibility; I'm a fool to the end.

However, if that's so, then what kind of reaction was I really expecting from her? I definitely can't say that I wasn't envisioning something malicious like, rendering her astonished by suddenly revealing myself.

I ought to call it outrageous good fortune if I'm able to get out of here without being hit, and of course, I don't have any guarantees that I won't get hit in the future. Even if she pours her drink all over my brand-new uniform, I'll resolve myself to the commendable feat of not raising a single complaint.

I'm certainly not the kind of person who'd earnestly feel remorse for it, but on the other hand, I honestly felt happy and relieved that I'd found Amiko Yurugase in the self study room, earnestly studying together with friends.

What, she isn't alone after all, is she.

They must be friends she made at cram school, or maybe friends from middle school attending different high schools–isolated in our class, she had been absent several days in a row, and while it was unusually easy for me to sympathize with her reasoning for not being absent at cram school because it was a place where you didn't have to build interpersonal relationships and all you had to do was study, somehow, it appeared as though things would not be resolved quite so simply.

Well, is there just no such thing as a place where you don't need interpersonal relationships?

Looked like she was having fun studying… With Amiko Yurugase laughing like that, and me willfully empathizing, it's unbearably embarrassing, unbearably unbearable, I want to just disappear from the face of the earth.

Amiko Yurugase might be furious with me right now, but I was gradually starting to overflow with a similar level of anger–I'd willfully convinced myself to do this, acted of my own accord, and now I'm willfully getting angry. My goodness, I really am unmanageable.

Whether those emotions of mine shone through without me saying anything (or rather, had I once again accidentally run my

mouth?), ultimately, Amiko Yurugase posed the reasonable question, 'What the hell is up with you?' That overbearing tone was somewhat calmer than when she'd drawn close to me on the roof; how to put it, it was like she was utterly perplexed by me, a bizarre person who was able to see through to her hidden circumstances.

Well, I knew that I was just a good-for-nothing girl with a bad personality, but looking at it from Amiko Yurugase's perspective, as a transfer student who keeps taking unexpected courses of action, not knowing much about my true nature, I might look somewhat mysterious.

Shrouded in mystery, or rather, ominous and creepy; if I appeared to be a "special person" on the level that people shouldn't get involved with me, I would hardly be able to hold back my laughter, and I don't think I'm happy at that misunderstanding, but… it was hard to deny that my sequence of actions on this occasion was deviating a little from my usual territory, and that's what I'm worried about.

Even for Amiko Yurugase's part, since this was only her second time speaking with me, even if she felt I was mysterious, even if she felt I was exotic, she might have been lost on how to approach me–if she'd made a mistake in dealing with me here, she didn't know how an unknown transfer student who seemed to have come from a different culture would behave in the future, but that was no reason for her manner of speaking to grow timid.

Faced with a visit from me without any prior notice, it didn't seem like she would run out of displeasure and indignation; however, the next thing that came out of Amiko Yurugase's mouth was, 'What aya doin,' and then, 'Didn't I tell ya how to do well in class, hm?' That line almost made me think she was trying to look out for me.

However, even if it appeared like she was worried about me, I once again felt like her ulterior motive was to push a troublesome classmate onto someone else in our class–setting aside those kinds of suspicions, to purely and simply answer her question, she did tell me how to do well… but honestly speaking, if I can find the words for it, she did tell me how to do well, but today, it had all come to nothing by my own doing.

Since we wouldn't settle things if I'd kept silent about it indefinitely, I softly relayed that fact to her. Then, I brazenly told her, 'After doing that, I visited the cram school because I was worried about you, being absent from school.'

It wasn't a lie, but it certainly was hypocrisy.

Amiko Yurugase made a conspicuously unpleasant face at my shamelessness, but, forthrightly stated right next to each other, it looked like my explanation of the situation had connected inside her

head–in other words, it appeared as though somehow, she was surmising that her advice had “come to nothing” as a result of me being “worried” about her.

She might be clever; it seemed that she possessed a much sharper sensitivity than the mental image suggested by the disorder of her tone and attitude.

Just as I guessed, there’s an impression of the “class circumstances” I’d already heard from Norika Kyakufuji–anyway, Amiko Yurugase made a sour face, like she’d swallowed a bug.

She might be thinking that she wouldn’t forgive me abusing the personal information she’d offered–since I feared I was being pressed for an apology, to dodge that issue, I rattled on about my own position. I’ll stutter a little, I’ll be at a loss for words, but I resolved to face her down.

I no longer care what anyone thinks about me–at any rate, I’m the absolute worst, so however I’m misunderstood, that false image must be preferable to the real thing.

But even though I don’t know when to give up, at least at the beginning, I decided to start the conversation sweetly.

Hmm, so.

Amiko Yurugase was originally the most powerful member of our class–speaking of which, that's a bit of a faulty expression, with a considerably bad connotation as well–I do hate using strong words, but anyway, that's the anachronism Norika Kyakufuji used to describe this prolongued absentee here.

The most powerful.

It's certainly a fitting expression if that's how you interpret leadership, and if she was in that position, the vague feelings of doubt I'd had about how detailed her knowledge about our classmates' personal information and everyone's personalities was would disappear.

However, there was another student in our class who could be called leader-like (Amiko Yurugase herself had used that expression)–Lily Suzubayashi.

Even before I'd interrogated Norika Kyakufuji, that was something I'd intuitively felt: Amiko Yurugase and Lily Suzubayashi were in a state of antagonism.

Two leaders in the class?

That doesn't seem like it would go well, and it definitely seems like a trigger for trouble; however, according to Norika Kyakufuji, since the two of them were different types of people, their antagonism didn't appear to have created much unrest–well, I shouldn't talk about things based just on my impression, but Amiko Yurugase certainly didn't feel like a "leader" to me.

In the good sense, she seemed to have a big-sisterly disposition, and in the bad sense, she seemed crude.

Even if you have a certain influence due to popularity, that doesn't mean you're in a position to lead people–she's the type who would think that kind of practical work is just a "bother"… Lily Suzubayashi is the opposite, the type who enjoys looking after people. Even if she's retired, even if she's an OB, she'd still show up to her club activities; that could just be one way in which Lily Suzubayashi was a helpful-minded person.

If that's the case, then the distribution of roles would fit accurately; however, that structure certainly had its flaws… especially looking at it from Lily Suzubayashi's point of view, Amiko Yurugase had shrewdly obtained popularity despite acting however she wanted, and it probably seemed like an unfair situation–if I have to say it, I was more like Lily Suzubayashi, and I could well understand the jealousy an overly serious person feels for a completely free-acting person.

It could only seem like she was taking all of the good parts for

herself–it's not entirely that simple, but if someone like Norika Kyakufuji used the expression "most powerful" for her, I could easily imagine that even students who didn't think very well of Amiko Yurugase at heart would also describe her like that.

However, if this is all it is, this is just a normal power struggle that happens in any classroom anywhere in Japan–a community maintained by a precarious balance of power. It fluctuates from time to time, but that's just a way of balancing itself; and that experience is even treated as something necessary to step out into society–in a word, that "there are many kinds of people".

Rather than concentrating power in just one person, it's better to disperse it between two or three people in order to hedge the risk–but, that balance is always right on the brink of dispute. If there's a change, it all comes crashing down. It was like that in the class I'd belonged to two years ago.

Norika Kyakufuji seemed like a member of the Lily Suzubayashi faction (or rather, with her gentle and peaceful demeanor, she wouldn't get along well with a rough girl like Amiko Yurugase; although, the person herself seemed to intend to be neutral), so I couldn't quite swallow all of what she said, and however much it's necessary to keep the class balance in mind when thinking about this… Comparing her story with each of the conversations I'd had with Amiko Yurugase and Lily Suzubayashi, what happened in that classroom just before I transferred appeared to be this kind of affair.

Well, if I call it an affair, that would imply that something underhanded happened… Anyway, this is where Ayakari Hatamoto makes her appearance.

The girl who hadn't come to school the day before Amiko Yurugase began her continued absences–I didn't know her face, since I'd only seen her name on the seating chart.

Norika Kyakufuji hadn't said much about her either–I thought that she'd become taciturn because Ayakari Hatamoto was a crucial part of the story, but that's not it; the truth appeared to be that she simply didn't know much about Ayakari Hatamoto's nature.

Somehow, it seemed that Ayakari Hatamoto was bad with social life, and had a tendency for isolation–it was a story I'd heard somewhere before, but no doubt it'll prove to be foreshadowing for the situation from now on.

I don't say 'tendency' for isolation to shade the truth with a euphemism; she wasn't, in fact, completely isolated. Ayakari Hatamoto had almost no friends in class, but the one single exception was her close relationship with Amiko Yurugase.

They were childhood friends, or something.

… I greatly despise words like ‘childhood friend’, but anyway, since Ayakari Hatamoto was bad at socializing, having a thick connection with the most powerful member of the class, Amiko Yurugase, ensured that she had a decent place in the classroom.

But still, it’s not what you say, it’s how you say it–I couldn’t help but carry some considerable misgivings; it seemed like their relationship was a bit distorted, but well, even I’m not conservative enough to deny a friendship that so brazenly ignored the class hierarchy.

If nothing had happened, it’d have been fine, and even if something happened, it wouldn’t become a serious matter if it could be dealt with properly–however, something did happen, Amiko Yurugase hadn’t dealt with it well, and it became a serious matter.

Norika Kyakufuji had told me about the whole sequence of events in some detail, but while I was listening (to what I’d asked about myself) I’d gotten fed up and started ignoring her halfway–to summarize, one day, Amiko Yurugase and Ayakari Hatamoto had a big fight.

Well, it was fierce enough that it evidently ought to be called a big fight, but it wasn’t a two-sided affair as that expression implies; it appears that the whole time, Amiko Yurugase was the one verbally abusing Ayakari Hatamoto.

So no matter how deep their childhood friendship was, in the end the balance of power was quite clear–well, after all, “friends as equals” is the height of delusion. Though you might say that if two friends hate each other just a little bit, that builds an even stronger friendship–and in the first place, it’s not unusual for a relationship between friends to be in danger of breaking down sometimes.

That’s what I think.

Norika Kyakufuji told me the reason for their fight as well, but since it was just ridiculously insignificant from my perspective, I’ve decided to leave it out (if I may make a small self-reference, it was a bit vulgar)–anyway, the friendship between those two girls fell to ruin.

It’d been ripped apart at the seam, and it couldn’t be mended.

The reason why she couldn’t pass this off as just an everyday affair was that their quarrel had a lasting effect, and it didn’t end as an interpersonal problem–the entire class felt its aftereffects.

The next day onward, Ayakari Hatamoto began staying home from school–she’d said it was some kind of cold, but anyone could see plainly that the cause lay in the relentless, angry bellowing she’d received from Amiko Yurugase the previous day.

She’d driven her friend, her longtime friend of all things, into not attending school. She’d thrust away someone in a weak position

from her strong position–plenty sufficient reason for the downfall of the class's most powerful member, Amiko Yurugase.

Sufficient, eh?

That's what I was thinking, strangely, as an outsider–rather, it's a little closer to the truth to say that the swirling discontent with Amiko Yurugase's tyranny used this as a pretext to erupt. At the very least, there's no doubt that Lily Suzubayashi and the students close to her saw this as a suitable opportunity to kick down their rival.

Thus, they isolated Amiko Yurugase.

It wasn't her tendency, it was a conspicuous, genuine isolation that even a transfer student could see.

She'd fallen from a position of popularity in the class, and since that tumble was an experience I had myself, it didn't altogether feel like just someone else's problem–in my case, it got to the point where I shut myself away from the world for several years. Although, her circumstances are quite different, and I'm sure Amiko Yurugase wouldn't want to be lumped together with someone like me–even so, it wasn't hard to imagine that her school life from then on has been unbearably more painful.

The reason she'd turned me away like that must have been that she didn't want an innocent utsider like me getting nonchalantly involved with this–in that regard, she certainly doesn't seem like a very tyrannical person.

But, there's no doubt that from the next day onward, she'd used me as an excuse to start staying home from school, so it's difficult to thank her–as a formerly powerful, formerly popular member of the class, it didn't seem like her pride would have allowed her to start being truant like Ayakari Hatamoto after being isolated herself, but it stands to reason that she'd reluctantly used escaping from an irritating transfer student as a reason to feign illness.

After all, something like that is just an excuse to yourself; but I for one thoroughly know the importance of excuses to oneself.

If the reason our classmates began being excessively kind to me after that was as an act of compensation for their guilty conscience over isolating Amiko Yurugase, and driving her into truancy the same way she'd driven Ayakari Hatamoto away, then her excuse would only be effective for herself–no, in the end, it might just be a deception only she herself couldn't see through.

Whatever it was, the recent state of the class was like the cheerful school life I'd dreamed about before transferring; but there are quite a few heavy problems with interpreting this affair as a petty, trifling argument between children.

The power balance between Amiko Yurugase and Ayakari Hatamoto, and then, the composition of the entire class as a vast

majority in opposition to Amiko Yurugase–the undefyable difference in power between the two sides perfectly satisfies the requisite conditions for classroom mayhem. If it's reached the point where two students are being truant, all the more so–it's left the range in which they could just let it go… and still, there might be a different reason why all those boys and girls were entertaining an outsider like me.

They brought me into the community because they were afraid if they didn't make me an "accomplice", as an outsider who witnessed their deeds, I'd become a complainant. I don't know much about it, but children these days wouldn't be ignorant of that information.

Children don't lack self-awareness as children.

I hadn't thought it would come to this–at least, that's what Norika Kyakufuji had said, but I wonder about that, it's a bit suspicious. I have no doubt that my previous classmates likely said that same line about me.

It's true that Amiko Yurugase dealt with Ayakari Hatamoto high-handedly, and when she'd been isolated in karmic retribution, there's no way people didn't proudly say things like, "Serves you right," with plenty of ill will throughout the classroom–it certainly wasn't unexpected that the festering danger within the class could be exposed.

The foreshadowing was simply being followed up.

That's what I think, as a pioneer of those circumstances.

If this were an old fairy tale, this might be a good time to sum it up with, "Everyone got their just desserts, and they lived happily ever after"; however, Ayakari Hatamoto and Amiko Yurugase, not to mention other members of the class like Norika Kyakufuji and Lily Suzubayashi, none of them are characters in a fairy tale, they're real people with prospects for the future.

Those boys and girls had raised the banner of revolt with the belief they were victims, and now that they'd all become perpetrators, they were trembling like cowards with fear of being reproached and punished–and in some way, they might be wishing for it.

Don't gloss over that.

Because everyone, *everyone*, knows the truth of how much easier it is to be a victim.

I simply couldn't know what kind of reaction Amiko Yurugase would show to my series of cowardly scouting missions unless I stopped talking, but on the other hand, whether or not I could safely stop talking was an unknown variable. Regardless of whether this ends up a mountain or a molehill, either way I'm sure there'll be some kind of calamity.[26] The most likely possibility is that she scowls and leaves her seat, but ultimately, she listened to my story until the very end without interrupting.

And in so doing, rendered me quite perplexed.

She kept silent, but I began feeling like she was reproaching me through her silence–I was trying to put things in order by telling my story, but in the end, it could only be interpreted as wanting to avoid responsibility for causing Amiko Yurugase's continued absences. I threatened Norika Kyakufuji in order to avoid responsibility; that's not all, in order to validate my excuses, I'd rudely, shamelessly set foot in Amiko Yurugase's private space.

"I was worried about you," my ass.

I was just worried about myself–like always.

So even if Amiko Yurugase shouted foul-mouthed abuse at me here, I resigned myself to accept it; however, she didn't do anything of the sort.

Perhaps Amiko Yurugase had learned her lesson with Ayakari Hatamoto, and so she couldn't take a strong step forward with me. Now that I think about it, even when she'd gotten up close to me on the roof last week, she'd had a poor endgame.

So, in her mental state, my fickle listening comprehension wasn't a joke at all.

Well, unexpectedly, that's what it's like when things don't go well in life–since it's me saying so, and nothing has ever gone well in my life, I'm sure that it's true.

Sitting in the fast food restaurant, the awkward silence continued to the point where I began feeling anxious despite myself, but when I started thinking I should get going soon, Amiko Yurugase broke the silence. 'Why do they only say such normal stuff,' Amiko Yurugase muttered listlessly.

'They'? Is she talking about the classmates who toppled her, and isolated her? That's what I thought, but I was completely wrong. Somehow, it seemed her hostility was directed at commentators who appear on TV.

Whenever an incident occurs that troubles society, they invariably say the same thing–do they not have any individuality?–isn't it embarrassing to appear on TV and publicly display your lack of

personality?–insults like that started gushing out as if from a burst dam.

It was easier to hear than insults directed at me, but it still wasn't very pleasant to sit and listen to a stream of abuse anyway. Since I don't watch much TV, I don't even know what kinds of everyday stuff commentators talk about.

What is this, gossip?

Is Amiko Yurugase belatedly trying to nurture her friendship with me? It'd be fairly prejudiced to say that excitedly badmouthing someone is an effective way to get closer to a fellow girl (and anyway, I'm usually the one receiving the insults, so I can't really judge how accurate that is), but maybe Amiko Yurugase intended to put that idea into practice.

She wasn't. (Fufu, I already knew that nobody would want to be friends with me. I know that.)

In short, she'd desperately wanted to complain about the "stereotypical views" rampant in society, so there was no helping it–there's no particular reason for me to side with the commentators, but if I had to say, isn't it generally correct in most cases to say the normal thing?

At the very least, the normal opinion is the opinion of the majority–though, justice according to majority rule is still cruel, always cruel, forever cruel.

Shrugging her shoulders at my bad mood (I have a nasty habit of wanting to refute whatever people say to me. That's why I can't make any friends), Amiko Yurugase finished up her discourse on television–'Well, ya investigation got all the details right,' she said, returning to the main topic.

'It's my fault I got isolated. It'd be bettah if ya left me alone–why aya gettin involved with me, transfah?'

Since her accent seemed especially strong even compared to others in the area, for the most part, I could only make conjectures about what she meant from her facial expressions; but once again, it appeared that Amiko Yurugase was trying to push me away.

I have a tendency to become intoxicated by my own cynicism, but well, even if we both had an experience of falling from power, this girl is different from me; it's not like she was a bad person by nature.

Amiko Yurugase isn't evil.

Driving a classmate into truancy is something that ought to be publicly condemned as evil, and it's completely indefensible, but if it's fine to persecute her "because she's evil", that'd end up implying that "there's a problem with being ostracized".

She's a problem child, so it's fine to mistreat her.

It's intended as discipline.

My goodness, I'm truly thankful for your guidance and encouragement!

…A long time ago, I lost all of my righteous indignation and my personal grudges, and even if I get very angry, I don't feel bitter. So while I understand what Amiko Yurugase wants to say, I haven't thought the same things myself.

I was actually an outrageous problem child, and I know that's how the world works. So the only thing I hate is Araragi, the man far beyond the limits of the world.

To me, forgiving that man means losing everything–Koyomi Araragi is my everything.

Don't take it from me.

Just like how it's fine in general society for the strong to do whatever they like to the weak, and for the evil to do whatever they like to people who are small in number, I can think whatever I want about Koyomi Araragi–while I was thinking about that, Amiko Yurugase looked at me with suspicion.

I got flustered thinking about how I'd introduce Araragi to her if she asked, but what if she was going to ask me to relay this dispute to the staff room and get it taken up by TV news, I wonder how much of a scolding I'd receive…

I couldn't say.

Now that the problem has produced two truant students, the staff room would already have grasped the situation, right? And the reason they haven't come out and settled it is that they're tacitly consenting.

I didn't know.

At this critical time, is that what they intend to do?

It's the same as it was with me.

Once a problem comes to light, it's the same if it gets picked up by TV news–however, even if the media sets itself upon a solution, if they look into the situation of Amiko Yurugase being driven to truancy after driving Ayakari Hatamoto in truancy, I don't think they could say anything particularly forceful.

But I don't know for certain.

If someone lights a fire, society won't rest until they've driven the perpetrator to the point of hanging themselves–and then everyone, with one voice, will talk like the virtuous and peaceful Norika Kyakufuji.

'I don't understand why it's come to this.'

They didn't intend for it to happen–so, what exactly did they intend?

Each and every one of them strings together the same exact complaints as the perpetrator. You can tell at a glance it's the same as

the perpetrator, even if you weren't looking closely.

For that reason, setting aside using me as an excuse, you could say that becoming truant herself and sharing the same pain as Ayakari Hatamoto was the better choice for Amiko Yurugase–there was a risk that it would be interpreted as running from her responsibility, but you could see that our classmates' guilt for isolating her was even bigger.

'I don't understand,' Amiko Yurugase said, heating up as she was speaking, like she was getting a bit into high spirits. 'Why would someone start stayin home from school just cause they got yelled at little, I don't understand at all.' I couldn't see any sign of remorse in that line, but seeing that my reaction was bad and therefore purposefully saying something provocative, that was something I of all people understood–even me, Sodachi Oikura, who truly can't understand people at all. Perhaps she felt guilty over irresponsibly staying home from school, and wanted me to rebut and strongly reproach her, but unfortunately, if that's the case then the only thing I can say is that she picked the wrong person.

I'm the least qualified girl in the world to reproach another person, so I have no choice but to betray her expectation. I was at my limit just replying with, 'Well, school isn't the kind of place you want to go anyway, right.'

I'm wearing a uniform, and I've had a face like a high school girl since I was born, but in fact, even totaling the time I spent at Naoetsu High School, I've really only attended high school for about one semester.

When it comes to truancy, even adding Amiko Yurugase and Ayakari Hatamoto's together, it's still nothing compared with mine.

Far from a double score.

The sole reason I advanced to the third year and I'm even set to graduate is simply due to the kind consideration of the staff at Naoetsu High School… So when it comes to staying home from school, I'm something of an expert.

I've held the conversation here so far as if truancy is some kind of big problem, but honestly, it's not like I didn't feel like at least this level of truancy wasn't such a problem in the first place.

Amiko Yurugase could study at cram school anyway, and I studied by myself at home–though I don't know what Ayakari Hatamoto is doing.

You commonly hear that school isn't just a place for studies, but if that's the case, if all you do is study, then it's definitely better not to go at all.

Well, I'd been admonished in an exemplary fashion to 'at least finish high school' by the Hakobe couple, but that's not how the world

works–there's no helping its twisted logic.

Amiko Yurugase listened to my shallow advice without showing any emotion–I wonder why it is, I know about Amiko Yurugase's circumstances, and that should have made us closer than when we'd had our exchange on the roof, but now it's like our gears aren't meshing together at all.

I suppose that's to be expected.

I can't tell her a single thing she wanted me to say. I can't fulfill her needs even a little bit. But even so, do I still have to say it to her after all?

Even if it's the standard, hypocritical thing to say, even if it's the normal thing to say.

Even knowing that it's a lie.

'It's not your fault.'

Finally, when she got up to leave, Amiko Yurugase threw a word of apology at me in a voice so small it was almost silent. It was a whispered, utterly rough “sorry”–she seemed hesitant, and it must have been one word she really was not inclined to say.

Well, from her view, I was an inflexible, tactless claimant who’d come to attack her for playing hookey; however, she might have felt obliged to apologize for making me feel her pain, after being made to feel the pain of Ayakari Hatamoto herself. So even if she’d had a prior engagement to return to, maybe she’d thought that the conversation couldn’t be settled unless she apologized.

‘Ohoho, please don’t worry yourself, it’s nothing that needs be forgiven’[27]–it’d be good if I had the capability to amicably settle things like that, but a dazed, twitching smile was all my low-capacity mind could handle.

With that, Amiko Yurugase clicked her tongue and headed back toward the cram school–likely to continue the study session that I’d rudely intruded upon.

She might be aiming for a pretty good university.

If that’s the case, since she’d want to devote herself to studying, surely she’d made the right choice to stop attending a jumbled up, complicated high school, and avoiding friends and romance and group behavior and joint responsibility and stuff like that–in any case, it would be absurd to urge her to attend school with reasoning like, “Because I’m a bit uncomfortable.”

No matter what, there’s no reason for her to distort her own life for my sake–or for the sake of Ayakari Hatamoto, for that matter.

In this situation, even if you couldn’t call it a resolution, it’d certainly be a breakthrough if she made up with Amiko Yurugase and started attending school again; but Ayakari Hatamoto has no obligation to do such a thing for my sake, or even for Amiko Yurugase’s sake.

I could only imagine how domineering and dictatorial Amiko Yurugase was to Ayakari Hatamoto, but her truancy is different from Amiko Yurugase’s and my sulking style of non-attendance; you could even say that she’d mustered her courage in sincere protest–it wouldn’t be easy for her to back down.

Since the calculation for required attendance days was the same for Ayakari Hatamoto, it’s highly likely that she’ll persist in being absent until the end of term, and then until graduation day.

In that case, no matter how guilty Norika Kyakufuji feels, no matter how much chilling uneasiness hangs in the air, that classroom will continue on normally without anything changing.

I've tried all day to get something done, but far from receiving any kind of reward, I'd lost something instead.

I've just about lost any potential friendship with Norika Kyakufuji, and I've lost the lifestyle of a pampered, popular person in class–from now on, what awaits me is a solitary youth, where I don't speak with anyone for my whole day.

I'll pass this next month in not just a simple state of isolation, but constantly bearing my classmates' frowns like walking on a bed of nails–if I hadn't done anything, things would be so much better, and not doing anything would have been the right thing to do.

Though, having said that, if I ended up not going to school because of this (anyway, as an expert on being truant, I wasn't resistant to the idea), if the number of absentees in class increased to three, it'd be quite likely for the school to step in.

If they learned about the situation, they ought to be willing to take up the problem in this delicate end-of-year period for exam students–but I began feeling hopeless even thinking about how they'd deal with the whole class being perpetrators.

Of course, I didn't at all feel inclined to sacrifice myself and live a lonely youth for the sake of the futures of classmates with whom my only relationship was being pampered a little bit, but I didn't want to get sucked into that kind of trouble–I'd even thought, *I should just wreck it all*; that idea's origins were unclear, likely based in my irritation, but it was a desire so ruinous it could only be diffused by beating my mental Araragi to a pulp.

Well, fine.

I didn't think I could lead an enjoyable high school life in the first place.

Making lots of friends, or getting a lovely boyfriend… I'm not such a megalomaniac as to entertain those delusions. I thought it'd take longer than just under a week after I transferred for something like this to happen–it exceeds even my pessimistic imagination, but this is fine. It's better to have an unpleasant result come sooner rather than later.

Now that it's come to this, contrarily, I started thinking that it's fine however much I'm isolated.

I get it, I get it, everyone.

If you want to make me concentrate on my studies that much, the traitorous Oikura will all but answer your wishes. When the end-of-term exams come around in December, I'll beat you all with perfect scores on every test, even the arts. You'll be left dumbfounded by this girl you all shunned.

Savor that defeat twice over.

No, no, despite being shunned, I'll dress up meaninglessly in

cute clothes, I'll dye my hair brown and cut it short, and then, getting the best grades in school, I'll deliver you a threefold humiliation.

As an unexpected result, or rather a side effect, at long last, in the winter of my 18th year, I received a sign that I was awakening to a twisted kind of style sense.

I could scarcely believe what happened next; as if to say *You really think you have a sense of style?*, the next event to unfold, as well as an even more woeful event to unfold were lying in wait for me– even though there are only eleven ways to fold a cube, my resolve never bears fruit, does it.[28]

Even if I'm continuously astonished by the series of unfortunate events visited upon me, I have no intention of acting like a tragic heroine. I don't deny that I have a bad habit of getting drunk off my own masochism, but at most I consider myself simply a supporting character in someone else's tragedy–I've hardly even been the main character in my own life.

I'm not a person to get intoxicated with the pretense of being a troublemaker–I'll leave the role of tragic heroine to someone more like Norika Kyakufuji.

My life is a succession of tragedies from which you'd want to avert your eyes, but not because I'm a special person–because I act foolishly.

I act like a fool, so I suffer like a fool.

I silently, stoically endure it; and while waiting to be saved by a gentle, kindhearted person, I can't help but *do* something.

I got myself into my current circumstance by acting foolishly too–if I'd just hung my head in disappointment and quietly returned to the Hakobe house, then I wouldn't have plunged carelessly into that terribly awkward scene at the cram school.

At any rate, I'm an unrelated supporting character.

I'm like an actor whose turn was over, but I failed to leave the stage; my objections did nothing but bother the playwright.

While I was visiting the cram school, searching for Amiko Yurugase, getting dragged away, and talking and listening to her as best I could without finding much common ground, night had completely fallen.

There was dinner to take care of, and I really should have gone home right away–however, at the last moment, I sorted my jumbled thoughts about deciding to be isolated, and made up my mind to enjoy my solitary high school life from now on.

So, for the first time in my life, I set foot in an establishment called a 'game center' on my way home–a popular gathering place.

I'd heard that cool high school girls were partial to taking pictures in the photo booths at these places. Now, in the height of the smart phone age, people should be free to take pictures as much as they like, but I'm sure the reason these photography machines have remained popular is that there's an uncommon appeal to them. That's what I'd thought up till now.

I don't have money to waste on games, but surely it's fine to snap one picture to commemorate the start of my isolation–with my heart thumping as if I was doing something much worse than trespass in a cram school, I heaved open the door to the game center and

stepped into the gaudy, reverberating music.

It was a detour for so-called relaxation, or distraction, but right from the start, it seemed that this great adventure of a course change was, unusually, the right decision.

My nervous feelings about all these new experiences were blown away–why was that? Well, in this photography machine called a 'photo booth', you could manually direct it to retouch the subject's facial expression.

Retouch my facial expression!? It can retouch *this* face!?

I couldn't stop a thin smile from spreading across my face. If I might dare to speak against my human nature, all of my worries (besides Araragi) became inconsequential. Even Amiko Yurugase and Ayakari Hatamoto vanished with a whiff from inside my head–is it possible that this narrow-minded way of seeing things, which might be called the symbol of my very being, could be changed not just in the picture, but in actuality as well?[29]

I see. If it's been endowed with such a noble feature, even in an age where anyone could become an amateur cameraman, it's not at all strange that these machines wouldn't have fallen from popularity… it could even remove this complex I've had for decades.

If both of my eyes were open wide, glittering and sparkling, wouldn't my failure of a life turn into something completely different? There I was, trying to substantiate that delusion, trembling with joy.

However, that joy was naturally transient–of course, I wasn't bottlenecked by the price. My eyes nearly jumped out of their sockets at the price of one per 500 yen, and confronted by such an exorbitantly high price just to alter the look on my face, my swollen excitement subsided all at once, but even so, after a brief period of agonizing, I just barely held my ground.

Settling for just one picture, it was the first time in my life I'd allowed an investment in myself–or in other words, wasting money on myself.

I've changed.

No, well, I certainly understand that nothing has changed in my life as a result of my eyes getting retouched in a photograph, but right now, this kind of reformation seemed like just what I needed.

In the end, I couldn't even speculate on whether that intuition was correct or mistaken, and it became an eternal mystery–I didn't enter the photography booth.

That is to say, I didn't have any small change on hand, so I had to break up a 1000 yen bill at the money-changing machine in order to make 500 yen.

Shaking my head at why none of the photo booths could give change like a vending machine, I started moving toward where the

money-changing machine was installed (I could at least get to the money-changing machine), but as soon as I lined up, I panicked, jumped back, and hid behind a pillar.

Since it was a fairly reflexive action, I almost didn't know why I'd done it myself, but when my thoughts caught up, the reason became obvious–I'd caught sight of faces I knew in line in front of me.

I'd thought to myself, wow, to come across people I knew in this game center that I'd entered for the purpose of transforming myself, what a coincidence! But it's simply because this place is like a playground where fellow students meet up–indeed, the students over there were from Shishikurasaki High School.

Moreover, it the class leader, Lily Suzubayashi, and a group of the people close to her, including boys.

Hrm. Even outside of school, I can recognize classmates… Now that I think about it, it was the same with Amiko Yurugase–maybe it's because they all wear their uniforms even outside of school.

Since I have a weak sense of belonging to both Naoetsu High School and Shishikurasaki High School, I didn't really have any special attachment to my uniform, but for normal high school students, uniforms could be an aspect of their identity.

Well, it's possible that like me, they're just wearing uniforms because they're on their way home from school, but… If that's true, since she's not wearing a jersey, wouldn't that mean Lily Suzubayashi didn't have club activities today? No, well, of course she wouldn't stop by a game center wearing a jersey…

My thoughts were jumbling around in circles at this unexpected encounter; however, now that it's come to this, there's only one thing for me to do.

I've got to run away as soon as possible.

Really, getting into such an uplifting mood was just a portent for the worst possible situation to befall me right afterward, wasn't it!

My mind was seized by those shameful thoughts, but thinking about it carefully, there's not a single reason why I have to run away here.

Even if it feels like an unforgivable crime, even a person like me is at least guaranteed the right to come to a game center.

It's not like there are laws restricting me from having fun.

I can openly have fun.

I don't have to be timid in front of classmates living out a glamorous youth, coming here after school in a mixed group of boys and girls–I can just put on a calm face, even exchange a small look, and just pass them by.

Actually, since my period of "being pampered" had come to an end after I'd recklessly bullied Norika Kyakufuji, even if they noticed

me, wouldn't they just blatantly ignore me? Or rather, since it's been such a short time since I transferred, perhaps they wouldn't recognize me as a fellow member of the class unless they got close and asked who I was.

But ultimately, Sodachi Oikura won't be bullied into following so-called logical reasoning. Whenever I encounter a situation I'm not prepared to deal with, I can think of no other options besides "running away."

However, this time, I ought to have taken the illogical action. That would have been the appropriate choice. Just like my spinal reflex had urged me, I ought to have run away as fast as I could.

If I had, I'd have gotten through this without hearing it.

If I'd broken into a dash, I'd have magnificently evaded what happened next–but I was too slow, and couldn't escape.

I could say I was being cautious, worrying that my footsteps would give me away if I ran, but since the music resounding throughout this place was so loud, did that consideration really mean anything?

No, maybe it did.

Because even through all of this music, I could pick out Lily Suzubayashi's voice addressing the classmate next to her–Hatamoto.

Hatamoto? Ayakari Hatamoto?

I'd quarreled with Lily Suzubayashi in front of the school gate, and besides, she'd given off a strong impression of a class leader, but… naturally, it's not like I could match all of my classmates' names to faces after just five days of being a transfer student.

So I'd assumed that the one unknown girl in the group was just "Ms. So-and-so from our class"–but somehow or other, she appeared to be none other than Ayakari Hatamoto herself, the girl who was truant before I'd even transferred.

Seeing her hanging out and having fun at a game center conflicted greatly with my mental image of her as a truant, but after hearing her surname being called many times after that by people other than Lily Suzubayashi, she could hardly be anyone else.

Well, fine.

Of course, this doesn't matter.

I don't intend to assert an irrational, superficial, prejudiced argument, like that it's terribly imprudent for her to be hanging out and having fun with classmates after faking an illness and staying home from school. It's not illegal for her to have fun, just like it's not illegal for me. While I wasn't going to school, I'd just about shut myself away from the world, but that's just a problem with my personality; I just couldn't live a cheerful lifestyle. Ordinarily, people have to find a way to reduce the frustration that piles up with the irregularities in their lives. There's no essential difference between Amiko Yurugase studying at cram school and Ayakari Hatamoto hanging out at a game center.

After breaking up her friendship with Amiko Yurugase, Ayakari Hatamoto had gotten closer to Lily Suzubayashi and her group; that's certainly not something that could be taken as a betrayal.

It's completely fine for her to have fun.

However, if Ayakari Hatamoto and Lily Suzubayashi started talking in lively voices about how they'd driven Amiko Yurugase into truancy, like it was some kind of accomplishment, things would become a little bit different–if they'd gathered at this amusement center as if to celebrate their achievement.

Ah, nah.

To tell the truth, I did think it would be natural for Ayakari Hatamoto to say "Serves you right" after hearing that Amiko Yurugase had become a truant like herself–it'd be wrong to force an excessively ethical viewpoint onto her and say that she had to feel guilty about anything. It's an ethical viewpoint that a nation ought to have, but it's all but impossible for an individual. Yet if everything was an intentional contrivance of theirs, it's a different story.

Well, saying that “everything” was a contrivance is just my typical assumption–there’s no way for me to know how much of it was accidental and how much was intentional just from eavesdropping like this.

I’m sure it’s closer to the truth to look at Amiko Yurugase and Ayakari Hatamoto’s quarrel as the result of many years’ worth of dregs accidentally overflowing–there’s a delicate line between whether her staying home from school the next day was due to malicious intent or not.

But what if Lily Suzubayashi had incited those two incidents to further her interests against Amiko Yurugase–setting Amiko Yurugase up as the villain and isolating her, while taking the truant Ayakari Hatamoto into her corner at the same time? Making Ayakari Hatamoto continue staying home to prevent a reconciliation–contrasting herself with Amiko Yurugase’s tyranny, and thereby settling her isolation?

Or perhaps Lily Suzubayashi hadn’t led her on, but Ayakari Hatamoto, who ought to have been bad with people, had made a deal with Lily Suzubayashi–what if Ayakari Hatamoto, dissatisfied with how Amiko Yurugase was treating her, had used the bellowing she’d received as an opportunity to finally bring about a revolution?

Of course, there were more possibilities–there might be a mastermind in that group controlling things from the shadows, or as an extreme argument following a twisted logic, I couldn’t rule out the hypothesis that someone outside of the group like Norika Kyakufuji was leading them all around by the nose.

As a transfer student and an outsider, I couldn’t understand the exact situation, it was unfathomable–all I could produce from casually eavesdropping was speculation.

But even if there are some approximations, it was the unshakable truth that Ayakari Hatamoto had colluded with Lily Suzubayashi to trick Amiko Yurugase.

The more I listened, the more unshakable it became.

The more I listened to those girls lording it over their cohort, talking as if they hadn’t a speck of guilt–the more I listened to their spite, to the point where I didn’t want to listen any more, the more unshakable it became.

Ah–gah.

Why did I end up hearing this.

After running this way and that, I ’d thought it was all finally over–I didn’t even want to know the truth.

Even if I can’t say I was fully satisfied, things should have been settled by my conversation with Amiko Yurugase–why are they trying to pull me into this sordid quagmire?

No, Lily Suzubayashi and Ayakari Hatamoto aren't trying to pull me into anything–to those girls, I'm simply a supporting character. Setting aside the question of whether it's a tragedy or a comedy, those two had no intention to do anything at all to me.

So I wasn't being pulled into the sordid quagmire, I dove into it myself–I really shouldn't do things that aren't like me. I've met with this terrible turn of events because I did something like enter a game center–so from now on, I'll act more like myself.

Impulsively, hysterically, reflexively.

Sodachi Oikura's standard style.

The modest personality of a fool like me.

What's normal for a non-special person like me.

I flew out from behind the pillar–not to run away; on the contrary, I plunged into the group of students at full speed.

My target was Lily Suzubayashi.

If I considered everyone in the group to be accomplices, then it wouldn't matter who I was aiming for–other than Ayakari Hatamoto–but in the end, the best target was the girl whom even an outsider could perceive as a leader.

It's not that I'm letting my rage take over and trying to sock her. To tell the truth, I was fired up and behaving incomprehensibly enough that I wanted to do just that; however, I just barely managed to hold onto my senses–indeed, I held onto enough of my senses to aim for the smartphone Lily Suzubayashi was fiddling with as she amused herself chatting.

I plunged into the line for the money-changing machine like a runaway car that lost its brakes, and, hearing the boys and girls around me scream, I successfully snatched the digital device from Lily Suzubayashi's hands.

Mission complete.

Or not, since this is only the start–I can't stop here, I'm hopelessly outnumbered.

Maintaining top speed, I headed toward the exit at the other side of the game center–well, I say 'top speed', but the dashing speed of a former truant and hikikomori didn't amount to very much.

I can't sustain this, and I'll use up all of my endurance soon.

I need to put as much distance between me and them as possible, and accomplish my next goal while they're still taken aback.

Coming out of an alleyway, almost without thinking I circled around to the back of a nearby convenience store and crouched down–then, I hid inside a garbage bin installed next to a vending machine.

A masochistic smile escaped me. Relying on a garbage bin on a byroad at a time like this is quite like me–it's like I'm a genuine piece of garbage.

But, you people are even more garbage than me.

Muttering those words out loud, I started operating the smartphone in my hand–I didn't own one, but the operating procedures fell within the bounds of common sense. It's not like you needed an instruction manual for this kind of handheld device in the first place.

First, most importantly, I activated airplane mode.

It seemed that cell phone companies these days could use security procedures to find phones' specific location and remotely erase all their data–but if you cut off the signal and put it in standalone mode, that security procedure is rendered meaningless.

Should be.

It's not like I had any confirmation of that, and it wouldn't be odd for me to be found by Lily Suzubayashi and her group as they searched the area after coming to their senses, so I can't afford to be leisurely. I was confident that they wouldn't report me, but there were a lot of people on their side… unlike me, they could perform a wide-scale search operation.

It's already too late to get off with an apology.

Now that I've started, my only choice is to finish it.

After setting the smartphone in airplane mode, I slid it open and tried to unlock it; however, as I'd thought, it required a password.

Ah, of course.

I need to input a four-digit number.

I felt cold sweat trickle down my cheek–perhaps it might be a tear.

I couldn't turn the testimony I'd heard while eavesdropping into proof. Since I didn't have a cell phone myself, I couldn't display any modern detective skills like recording their conversation or secretly snapping pictures.

But that's because I'm a behind-the-times hick from the country–to all these city kids, smartphones were almost like a part of their bodies.

Part of their bodies–part of their brains.

If Lily Suzubayashi and Ayakari Hatamoto had joined hands to plot the downfall of Amiko Yurugase, then there's no way they didn't use smartphones as a communication tool for that purpose at some point.

Whether they were text messages or SNS or SMS or group chats or whatever–this phone is full of evidence.

Because of the internet and smartphones, middle and high school students' interpersonal relationships have become complicated, digitized, vicious and devious and such, and it seems to have become a problem for society–but on the other hand, using digital devices left unavoidable traces; 100 percent certain proof.

Anonymity isn't worth it, so it seems.

If you succeeded in analyzing someone's smartphone, afterward, one thing leads to another–just like that, an entire group could be destroyed.

Since they understood that, cell phone security was fundamentally rather rigid–that's why it could be guarded by remote operation, and why, depending on the configuration, I'd heard there was a feature that would reset the device if you entered too many wrong passwords.[30]

Even if that's not the case, there's no way I'd have time to try out all 10,000+ potential numbers. I had to unlock Lily Suzubayashi's smartphone in one go–if I can't, it's all over.

After taking back her smartphone; in other words, after ensuring the safety of her and her group, Lily Suzubayashi might mercilessly hand me over to the police.

In a sense, I'm a fugitive on the run, who's done even more questionable things than steal a cell phone, so that's a situation I'd absolutely want to avoid.

A four-digit number. One out of ten thousand.

As the incarnation of misfortune and disaster, I'd probably get it wrong even if it were a fifty-fifty chance–even if it were a chance of 9,999 out of 10,000, I'm confident I'd still get it wrong. However…

Then there was an intense noise. The garbage bin that had served as my protector had been sent flying with a rough kick–the empty cans and plastic bottles pounded against me as they scattered.

As I was protecting my face with my arms, I saw the form of a male student blocking my way, with a facial expression like a demon–he called out to his comrades in a loud voice. In the blink of an eye, the entire group, including Lily Suzubayashi and Ayakari Hatamoto, had assembled and surrounded me.

I thought for some reason that the number of people had increased from when I'd seen them at the game center… I suppose they'd called everyone to gather here.

It's so wonderful, having lots of friends.

Although they didn't get physically violent, the boys and girls didn't hesitate to start laying into me with words of merciless ridicule–it's almost like they want to hurt me.

I'm getting hurt, though.

No matter how full of scars I am, I still feel pain when I get

hurt–that's why I can't forgive people who pretend to be hurt, who pretend to be pitiful, who use weakness as a weapon.

I can't forgive anyone who's even more feckless than me.

In the middle of the storm of abuse, in a louder voice than ever, Lily Suzubayashi inquired, 'What the hell aya doin'–it was a much more violent tone than Amiko Yurugase's.

It seemed like a question that could finally start a conversation; however, instead of replying, I returned the same question to her, 'What are you doing?'

The smartphone screen I showed her while answering was more than enough–it was unlocked, a communication app was running, and the screen showed that I'd finished my analysis.

Everyone fell silent. Especially Ayakari Hatamoto, who went quiet as the color drained from her face–regardless of how violent they'd been, how they'd pretended to have the upper hand by a wide margin, after all, they were normal high school students with decent intelligence.

They seemed to have surmised everything.

My goal in snatching the phone, and the fact that their own goal had been ruined.

…Strictly speaking, there was one way for these boys and girls to turn the tables. Now that they've surrounded me, they could all beat me up and forcibly take the cellphone back–that'd be easy.

But in that case, the affair would turn into something else.

If you people have the resolve for that, it's my loss.

Do as you like. Do as you dislike.

As I let out a cackling laugh, Lily Suzubayashi stared at my defenseless form as if I were an apparition–grinding her teeth in frustration, she yelled, 'What the hell, you on Yurugase's side, huh?'

Yurugase's side? What does that mean… 'Does Amiko Yurugase look like such a virtuous person for you to help her out after I isolated her?'

'If that's the case, you aren't qualified to stand above people either.'

'Hauh? Then whose side aya, huh? Fah whose sake, undah whose influence, based on whose value system aya screwin around like this?'

As she continued relentlessly questioning me in that shrill voice, I got fed up, and thought of a suitable answer.[31]

'Araragi.'

As for why I was able to unlock Lily Suzubayashi's smartphone–there's no need for an elaborate explanation. All I did was enter her birthday as a four-digit password, which Amiko Yurugase had so conscientiously included in the personal information she'd provided me.

It's often noted, to the point of leaving a sour taste in one's mouth, that you mustn't use all of the same digit or your birthday as passwords for anything; but it's also often noted to the point of leaving a sour taste in one's mouth that people will never stop doing it.

Well, for the most part, it was a better gamble than inputting a number at random, and while I had a few other candidates if her birthday had been wrong, there's no doubt it was a risky bet–in the worst case, I could have hid the smartphone somewhere and tried to bluff my way out, but I felt relieved from the bottom of my heart that I got through without resorting to negotiations. Because of my hot temper, I'd be even worse at negotiating under that level of suspense.

But of course, this doesn't mean I got lucky; no matter how strong your security is, if the people operating it are lazy and idle, it's easy to break–that's such a mundane principle that I don't even need to refer to the cram school gate check as evidence.

From Lily Suzubayashi's perspective, surely she hadn't expected her enemy Amiko Yurugase to remember her birthday… whether or not you remember classmates' birthdays has nothing to do with qualifications to be a leader, so that's not a point she ought to regret.

In any case, that was the trick I used to pull through my predicament.

So, about what happened afterward. I'd unofficially indicted the bad guys with incontrovertible proof; but, although I'm glad I did, I decided to give them a chance to become more of a decent person than a grouch like me. A chance I'd received from so many people, but of which I'd never managed to avail myself–I hope from the bottom of my heart that those kids can make use of it.

'Amiko Yurugase is probably still in the self-study room at the cram school, so go and meet up with her right now; I don't care what kind of lies you tell, just make your peace with her. If you do, I'll return the smartphone,' I declared.

As if to confirm her defeat, and at a loss for what to do as a leader, Lily Suzubayashi started moving closer–maybe she heard it as an unreasonable demand; however, taking the current situation into account, it wasn't exactly a lenient ruling.

It's the best ruling from the worst person. Please content yourself with it, and accept it.

Whether that acute insincerity of mine came through or not, Lily Suzubayashi and Ayakari Hatamoto's decisions came quickly–if the other classmates one step away from their position hadn't fully understood the situation, or if they didn't feel like they were part of the party concerned, they simply followed those two away.

Amiko Yurugase and Lily Suzubayashi.

Amiko Yurugase and Ayakari Hatamoto.

A pair of enemies, and a pair of broken up friends.

While I had endless curiosity about what kind of exchanges and processes occurred in each of their relationships afterward, unfortunately, that falls outside the scope of my concern–and besides, I wasn't really interested. I used up all of my interest in other people's affairs a long time ago.

At any rate, Amiko Yurugase and Ayakari Hatamoto both showed up at school the next day; it seemed like they'd done well acquiring some worldly wisdom–well, even Amiko Yurugase isn't as much an idiot as I am. She certainly hadn't swallowed the story her classmates had told her, but she'd had enough worldly wisdom to give in and get it all over with; she's not as much an idiot as me.

Anyhow, with that, the members of my new class were finally arrayed in their entirety–I can't say whether the atmosphere had returned to how it was before after the hierarchy had been temporarily destroyed, and even if it goes back to how it was after this, well, it probably won't; but cleverly pretending that things are normal while getting on with life is a just a part of youth. That's what I thought, though it just felt like someone else's problem.

Really, it was someone else's problem.

Despite their relationship straining, Amiko Yurugase and Ayakari Hatamoto had gone back to being childhood friends, and Lily Suzubayashi and Amiko Yurugase's diarchal power system had been restored to its superb balance; however, the way they'd treat me had yet to be settled.

Well, of course.

I'd returned her smartphone, but from Lily Suzubayashi's view, I must've seemed like quite the odious pest–and while I'd persisted in pretending not to know anything, from Amiko Yurugase's view, the situation took a sudden turn right after I'd invaded her cram school, so it was impossible for her not to doubt such an exceptionally uncanny coincidence.

I'd even secretly hoped that I might become someone people tipped their hats to in that classroom, but far from tipping their hats, they kept their distance as usual.

In other words, I was the only one whose isolation didn't subside in the least–it got even worse. The involved parties simply looked at me with distrust, as if saying, 'Just what was she trying to achieve?'

All I wanted was to take a picture in the photo booth…

Although I don't think it'd cause any disturbances, of course it'd be hard for me to go to that game center again, so I suppose that modest wish won't come true; so, I could say that the only thing I got out of it was my face getting all the more grim.

I'd rushed out the idea from my mouth the instant I'd thought it, but I suppose that's something I have in common with the Araragi faction… Well, if that man were in my place, I wonder if he'd have brought things to a close more intelligently. It's good I turned on them before they turned on me, but I'd certainly learned from that man the danger of everything being over if they turn on you first.

Anyway, that's the end of it.

This time, I'd been saved by the fact they'd really had a sinister design (so nice of them)–if they hadn't, I don't think I'd have flown out from behind the pillar or anything else. Psychologically speaking, when people see other people who've suffered injuries or have terrible things happen to them, they're able to accept the situation by justifying it in their minds like, "Even the victim had their issues" and "Since such a terrible thing happened to them, they must have done something terrible in a previous life or something"–but this time, I'm glad I chanced upon those kids' garbage sides. Even Amiko Yurugase hadn't been spoken well of after she'd been driven into isolation, and I'm glad this world is so worthless.[32]

Though, of course, the most worthless piece of garbage is me.

If you're unable to obtain anything, it's natural that all you do is lose things.

Ah, well… wait, wait, I certainly can't say that all I do is lose things, or that all I obtained was a worsening of my judgment–there was one thing, like a byproduct, that even someone like me was able to acquire.

The Hakobe couple couldn't look past the fact that I hadn't made any friends even after starting a new life, so despite my hesitation, they forced a smartphone onto me–my isolation was caused by my lack of communication skills, and it wasn't at all related to my lack of a communication tool like this… but it'd be a lie if I said it didn't make me happy.

Owning a smartphone made me feel more like a high school girl, even if just a little–I started feeling somewhat lighthearted just because of that; I might be obstinate, but my mental makeup really is quite simple.

Naturally, I used a random four-digit number as my password.

Needless to say, my SNS and texting app inboxes, even my address book were just about empty, so actually, there was no need for that much security…

Thinking self-deprecating thoughts like that, telling myself just half a month longer just half a month longer everything will change in a half month, I was heading to school, dragging my feet along in a gloomy gait, when the smartphone unexpectedly rang.

I say that, but the screen was showing the single telephone number in my address book, in other words, the number of the Hakobe house landline.

Did I forget something? Tilting my head, I picked up. The call was from Mrs. Hakobe–it seems someone had rung the Hakobe house intercom asking for me.

It appeared I had a visitor–my heart skipped a beat.

'I, is it… a boy about the same age as me?'

'A small build, looks like math is his strong suit?'

Bracing myself to the point of embarrassment, I asked her–Mrs. Hakobe promptly denied, 'No, not at all.'

The visitor seemed to be a middle-aged man, completely drunk, even this early in the morning… on top of that, with a slurring, shouting voice, he'd called himself my father.

'Aaalright, I understand. I'll head back riiight now.'

After all, even with that, I'm perfectly all right.

Notes

[←1]

Her first name, 育 (*Sodachi*) means “to grow up” or “to be raised”.

[←2]

The original makes a pun comparing “interpretation” and “*seppuku* beheading” (both pronounced *kaishaku*) instead of “mystery” and “misery”.

[←3]

The original idiom used, 郷に入っては郷に従え, *gou ni itte wa gou ni shitagae*, literally means something like, “when you enter a country, go along with that country”.

[←4]

'Balloon', 風船/*fuusen*, is written with the kanji for 'wind' and 'boat'.

[←5]

The Japanese word for “how much/many” is ikura. “Euler” is pronounced *oiraa* in Japanese. Both are potential puns on “Oikura”.

[←6]

“Look for a big tree when you need shelter” is one translation of this idiom, and another less literal one is “Serve powerful people for your own good.”

[←7]

The idiom she uses for “introvert” here, *hikkomi jian*, shares the same start as the idiom she uses for “no backing out”, *hikkomi ga tsukanai*.

[←8]

This idiom *tamatta mono dewa nai* used at the end can also mean “intolerable” or “irresistible” in addition to “can’t help it”, so the applicability of those other meanings is possibly the reason she calls it theatrical ad-libbing.

[←9]

Pre-established harmony is Gottfried Leibniz's philosophical theory of causal interactions between substances. In it, substances only affect themselves, and only appear to affect other substances due to preprogrammed states of those substances. For example, an apple falling on your head doesn't cause you pain; rather, the apple was destined to fall, and your head was destined to feel pain at that moment. In other words, Sodachi's circumstances appear to be somewhat beyond her control, but here she's thinking about how it's her own self that's responsible for her condition.

[←10]

In the original Japanese, Yurugase calls her *ondore* (familiar/rude 'you' in Kansai), which Sodachi confuses with *ondori* and wonders why she's being called a rooster. (Especially since she'd just said she couldn't turn into a bird.)

[←11]

The way this form of address (*ondore*) is used makes it very likely that the characters are speaking Kawachi-ben, locating the story somewhere in eastern Osaka. I've taken the liberty of translating this accent as something vaguely New York or Bostonian, but feel free to interpret it however you wish. If you have some familiarity with Japanese pronouns, the way *ondore* is used here is similar to *omae* in standard Japanese. The level of rudeness implied by *ondore* differs from place to place, and in other areas of Japan, it's more comparable to *kisama/temee*.

[←12]

The Japanese mentions ‘submerging in a/the “pool of blood” (*chi no ike*)’, which is both one of the levels of Buddhist hell, and are also naturally occurring ponds where iron has turned the water a red color. It’s unclear which one is being referenced.

[←13]

She refers specifically to Standard Japanese, the dialect most people are taught and the most frequently used in media, which is spoken mainly in the Tokyo area. It's likely that most of the Monogatari series is set in a Tokyo suburb, but the people where Sodachi has moved speak in the Kansai dialect.

[←14]

In the original Japanese, she says ごめん七歳/*gomennanasai* (sorry nine years old) instead of ごめんなさい/*gomennasai* (I'm sorry). To which she thinks, "Maybe I'm trying to get through this by acting like a nine-year-old."

[←15]

An idiom, 目は口ほどにものを言う (*me wa kuchi hodo ni mono wo iu*), which literally means 'eyes say as much as the mouth'.

[←16]

Two idioms were used here in conjunction based on the loanword “button”, so I chose to translate the first one more literally. “Fastening the buttons incorrectly” (ボタンを掛け違える) is an idiom meaning “bungling the order of something”. The English-sourced idiom “press the reset button” is also literal from the Japanese.

[←17]

The Japanese idiom is 損して得とれ (*son shite toku tore*), which literally means something like, “take a loss to earn a profit”. It’s also localized as “lose a fly to catch a trout”.

[←18]

An alternative way of writing the word used for profit, 得/*toku*, is 徳, which is in the word 人徳/*jintoku*, meaning “personal virtue”.

[←19]

An idiom, 下手の考え休むに似たり (*heta no kangae yasumu ni nitari*), which literally means something like “it’s hard to tell poor thinking from sleeping”.

[←20]

OB = Old Boy, a British-sourced loanword that refers to former students of a particular school.

[←21]

The term used for 'sudden' here, 豹変, uses the kanji 豹 which means panther or leopard. Also, the expression 'reveal one's true character', 馬脚をあらわす, is based on the word 馬脚, which means 'horse's legs'.

[←22]

The words for 'easy' (簡単) and 'astonishment' (感嘆) used here are both pronounced *kantan*.

[←23]

Arsène Lupin is a character from a series of detective novels by Maurice Leblanc.

[←24]

The Japanese uses an idiom, 剣を落として船を刻む, which is something like “dropping your sword and carving your boat”. It means “to obsess over an old matter and become unable to adapt to a changing situation”.

[←25]

A rare case of an idiom actually somewhat working in both languages, ヤキを入れる/*yaki wo ireru* means “to temper” or “to discipline” (or, colloquially, “sunburn/tan”) but the literal meaning is something like “turn on/put in the fire”. It’s something often said by delinquents in media and stuff to discipline uh, people.

[←26]

The Japanese includes a play on an expression ('if it's a field or a mountain') which means 'not caring what happens afterward'. A literal translation is more like: "Far from thinking 'if it's a field or a mountain', I felt like it'll end up a brush fire or a forest fire."

[←27]

She's speaking like a proper ojousama here.

[←28]

The “unfold” repetition is my way of replicating play on the word 展開 (tenkai). It’s usually used to refer to, for instance, a new development in the story, but another way of expression its meaning is with the verb “to unfold” as in, the next event to unfold. Nisio then makes a small play on words with 展開図 (tenkaizu), which here refers to a polyhedral net in geometry–nets are basically models of polyhedrons made from thin material like paper, and there are eleven patterns for the faces to appear in a net for a cube. If that makes no sense still, take a look at **cube nets visually**, and that should clear it up.

[←29]

In Japanese, the word 眼孔 (gankou) means 'eye socket', but it is also used to refer to the extent of one's discerning eye and the figurative ability to see without hindrance.

[←30]

Reset as in reset to factory default, presumably.

[←31]

When she says a “suitable answer”, the adjective used in Japanese is 適当 (tekitou), which can mean either 'appropriate’ or 'unserious’ depending on context. And of course, in this context, it’s probably both.

[←32]

A play on the expression 世の中は捨てたものじゃない (yo no naka wa suteta mono janai), which means 'there's still some worth in this world'–Sodachi says 世の中が捨てたものでよかった (yo no naka ga suteta mono de yokatta) - 'it's good there's no worth in this world', or thereabouts.